

# THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

By Andrew Cheffers

### PART 1

#### CHAPTER ONE - MARY

Mary is standing in the kitchen, wondering how she will cope with today. She was invited to a picnic with her old high school friend, Betty. She plans to take her four kids and Betty's family on the original Puffing Billy train.

The Puffing Billy train is a historic steam passenger train operating from Belgrave, east of Melbourne, to Menzies Creek. The train line was reestablished as a tourist ride that travelled through the Dandenong Ranges. The Belgrave train station is about an hour's drive away.

The outing has been planned for months, so the logistics of catching up with Betty are becoming difficult. Getting there will be a tight squeeze, especially in one car. Her car has front bench seating, which only holds three people, and the back seat can seat five kids. She looks over at the loud, ticking clock on the wall and sees that she has another ten minutes before she needs to depart. The plan is to pick up Betty at her house by 10 am.

The two oldest boys were playing footy in the backyard, occupying themselves before leaving. Mary keeps looking out the window, ensuring the boys are still there. Today is important to her; she has a schedule, and by 9:30, she has to be in the car and on the road.

At 9:25, Mary takes the picnic basket out to the car. She has another five minutes of peace before then. Her daughter, Linda, who is nine, is still in her PJs playing in her room. She's so focused on dressing the new doll. She wasn't happy with the dress and fiddled with the fringe at the end. Little did she know what the next 60 minutes would be like.

The youngest boy, Sandy, is dressed and stacking his building blocks in the lounge room. The blocks came from his neighbour. The neighbour had young kids, but they have moved on to bigger things.

Mary is looking out the window, and her thoughts turn to the phone call she received three days ago. It was a woman looking for Mary's husband, Jim. The woman sounded concerned, and it bothered Mary. The woman just asked if Jim was there, and when she told the woman that he was in Rhodesia coaching the national athletics team and wouldn't be back for another nine months, she hung up. Therefore, she wonders what the phone call is all about.

Jim cheated on her two years ago with a woman he met through work. The woman's husband became suspicious and hired a private investigator, who revealed the affair. Mary gave Jim a choice between leaving and staying, and Jim chose to stay. Mary feels like she should have left him anyway.

Mary looks at the clock, and it is time to go. She gathers the lunches and goes to pack the car. She goes out the front door with the bags in hand, and as she gets to the car, she realises

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

she has forgotten the keys. Mary always forgets things. She is very good at covering up her forgetfulness, although her memory loss causes anxiety, making it even worse. Mary turns back from the car and notices she left the door open. Worried that Oscar, the dog, could get out, she looks around and sees Oscar walking down the driveway. 'Geez!' She yells out. She drops the bag and starts after the golden retriever.

Oscar often roams the neighbourhood looking for his companions, and today is no different. The kids usually take Oscar for a walk, sometimes down to the park. However, today, Oscar is on his own and rushing to the park. Then, Oscar hears his master call out. Oscar senses his owner wanting to confine him, so he runs off down the street.

'GEEZUS!' Mary yells at the canine. She has no time to chase him and walks back to the house, murmuring. 'That little mutt will have to stay out!'

The boys in the backyard are playing kick to kick, and Peter, eleven years old, the older of the two, accidentally kicks the ball over the fence. Jack, the younger, climbs the wooden panels to retrieve the ball. Billy, the neighbour's German Shepherd, is waiting for him. When Billy sees Jack jump over the fence, he's excited to have a friend and goes over to jump and play with Jack. Jack hates it, but he knows this is the routine, and he lets Billy lick him.

Jack hears his mother swearing in the front yard as Billy plays with him. The boys were told at breakfast that they were going on a train ride and would have to be ready and in the car by 9:30. Jack takes the outburst as a sign of 'Let's go.' He pushes off Billy, high-tails it back over the fence, and runs to the side gate towards the car. Peter also follows Jack.

Linda hears her mother swearing outside and becomes curious. She walks over and peeks out the front door. The daughter sees her mother coming straight for her, extremely unhappy. When Mary spots her, Linda realises she is still in her PJs and hears her bellow about getting ready. Being so much like her mother, Linda recognises that 'The Beast' has appeared. Linda calls it 'The Beast' because her mother becomes a 'Yelling Machine'. Linda senses this and runs back inside to get dressed.

Mary stops at the front door when she sees Linda retreat. She then remembers that the keys are in the kitchen. When retrieving them, she sees the missing boys in the backyard. Another outburst passes her lips, and she stamps back to the car, finishing the packing, although, amazingly, she is relieved to see the two boys in the backseat. Linda runs from behind her and jumps into the backseat as well. Mary puts the picnic basket in the boot, realising they are very late, gets in the driver's seat, backs the car out, and drives off.

## CHAPTER TWO - SANDY

The noises in the house comfort Sandy. Someone is always making a sound, and when it's silent, he begins to wonder. He'd heard his mother yelling outside somewhere, but that didn't move him. He is focused on stacking the blue blocks on top of the yellow ones to make a tall structure, which is more critical to Sandy.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

The curious toddler needs to understand nature, how it looks, feels, and sometimes tastes objects. He takes a block, examines it and decides where to put it. His concentration is uncommon for a four-year-old. The downside to having such a trait is that he is unaware of his surroundings. He discovers things in the house or around the yard to play with. His sister plays a game with him called 'What is that?' Sandy picks up an object and waves it at Linda, and she tells him what it is. Mary notices that Linda often plays with Sandy, and the mother is relieved Sandy has a sibling to play with. Mary sees Sandy in a world of his own, daydreaming, happy to do things, and laughing a lot. What more can a mother ask for in her child?

His father was never home, and Jim had very little time to play with him when he was home. However, this doesn't deter Sandy because when his father is home, he sits on his lap and plays with his scruffy beard. His father is kind to him and happy to see him. He tickles Sandy until it makes him laugh, which doesn't take too much effort.

Sandy finishes stacking the blocks and notices that it is quiet. There's no stomping of feet, crashing of things, or the endless sounds from the kitchen. Feeling the need to see his mother, he topples the blocks loudly. Often, he has to make a sound to get Mary's attention, but when he crashes his blocks, his mother doesn't appear. Listening to the footsteps, he hears nothing. Finally, Sandy calls out, 'Mummy!' he repeats it several times, and silence is the reply.

He stands and walks into the kitchen, shouting, 'Mummy!' She isn't in the kitchen. The ticking of the clock fills the ambient. He runs into the lounge room and then into Mummy's bedroom, only to find no one. He wanders around the house and finds nobody. Not even Oscar is seen. With each searching moment, he becomes troubled. His calls for Mummy become louder, and each call is unanswered. Each call turns into a sob. Finally, he scrounges down the hallway, his eyes watering, calling out, 'MUMMY!'

Sandy's father, who had been appointed the National athletics coach of Rhodesia ten months ago, was preparing his long-distance athletes for the upcoming Mexico Olympics. However, the country's political unrest has made the preparations stressful. In addition, Mexico is threatening not to provide visiting visas to the Rhodesian athletes, which would mean they would be unable to attend the 1968 Olympic Games.

All his sacrifices, including coming to Rhodesia from Australia and dealing with the political unrest, were going to waste. When he first arrived, it was chaos, nothing was organised, and the sales pitch he received to take up the position had him believe more. He discovers that he has to coach the program, administer it, set it up, consult, fundraise, negotiate, and act as a father figure to the athletes. It's challenging dealing with sporting administration. The funding from the administration has been reduced since coming here, and he notices that the country's white administration's sympathy towards the black athletes is appalling. However, Jim's assessment of the group of athletes in the program is promising.

On his first day with the group of athletes, they all arrived barefoot, shirtless, and wearing only scruffy old shorts. Jim wonders whether this is a joke. If it is, then he has a session for them. Rolling his eyes, he looks towards the wilderness in the distance and spots a ridge. The bushland looks relatively flat and open before the hill. He points towards the highlands and utters, 'Run and back'. His quick assessment has them run about fifteen miles and return. He would see them in about two hours. He returns to the athlete's compound to tend to his duties. After two hours, he returns to the starting position and waits for their return; after an hour, there

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

is no sign of any runners. He returns to the compound, insinuating that they must have given up. The compound is about ten miles away.

It was nighttime when there was a knock at the door of Jim's quarters. He opens it to find the group standing there, tired and worn out. Confused by their composure and tiredness, the following day, he goes to investigate his assessment of the distance. The group ran sixty miles. Nevertheless, Jim's impression is enough to continue working with them, hoping to see worthwhile results.

When Mary arrives at Betty's place, Betty and her two daughters are waiting outside their house and jump into the car. Mary apologises for her lateness, and they start on their journey. The boys in the back are always causing havoc, niggling each other and teasing their younger sister Linda. Being the only girl in the family, she often turns to her mother for comfort and to her little brother, Sandy. Sandy plays with her, and she always likes the attention. He is quiet and easy to play with. She looks across the rear seat and doesn't see him. She calls out to her mother, 'Where's Sandy?'

### CHAPTER THREE - OSCAR

Jim is angered by Rhodesia's athletes' decision to be denied access to Mexico. The team's visas were cancelled. All his work has been in vain. People must be aware of the effects of the scenario and the wrongdoing. His next step is to tell the story of the replications of allowing politics to interfere with sporting competitions.

He will return home and write about it, and he will need Mary's assistance to document his experiences. One of his colleagues mentioned that an American university provides scholarships to overseas students who present the most incredible adversity. This would be an excellent opportunity for him to share his story about the Rhodesia incident. So, he applied and sent off his essay before his return.

Calling home is challenging to organise. Access to phones with overseas privileges is expensive. When he did have the chance to call home, nobody answered. He gives up after a couple of goes and then packs to return to Australia.

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Sandy crouched against the wall and rubbed his eyes. His attention turned to a small red object at the end of the hallway. He stood and walked over to investigate. He picked it up and realised that it was UCKAA's toy.

Sandy pronounces Oscar 'UCKAA'. He wonders where he is and calls, 'UCKAA! UCKAA!' Often, when he does, he hears the paw-clicking sounds on the wooden floor coming his way. There is none, and Sandy wonders whether Oscar is in the backyard. He takes the toy and opens the back door. Sandy was expecting the door to remain closed, but surprisingly, it was open.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Then suddenly, he hears a ringing from the yellow device in the lounge room. He's often asked to talk into the handpiece to say hello to Daddy, but this time, he doesn't want to say hello to Daddy; he wants to find Oscar.

He pushes on the screen door and steps down to the yard. Yelling, 'UCKAA! UCKAA!' he then runs around to the side of the house to peek inside Oscar's kennel. Sandy remembers using this spot as a hiding place when he played hide and seek with his brothers and sister. Sandy loves playing the game, but his brothers never let him be the seeker. They would complain that he took too long to find them. Sandy found it frustrating; however, he does like the hiding part. Sandy wants to see Oscar today, but he isn't in the kennel or backyard.

He looks to the side gate and notices that it is ajar. His brothers often leave it open, allowing Oscar to escape into the front yard. Sandy pushes open the gate with Oscar's toy in hand and runs into the outer yard.

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As Mary hears the words 'Where Sandy?' a flood of dread surrounds her. She knows where he is, and he's not in the car. The little toddler is back at home. The mother of four shudders with panic. She closes her eyes and wants to yell out the most obscene word she can think of. Although knowing that the kids are in the back, she bites down on her lip. In the driver's seat, Betty recognises Linda's distress. 'Betty says, 'Mary, why don't we head back to your place and picnic in a park since we will miss the train anyway.' Mary, shaking her head with frustration, agrees. They have travelled for at least half an hour, and there is a lot of traffic on the road. Betty turns on the radio, and the news presenter mentions that the protesters in town are causing traffic delays. The boys in the back start to whine about being in the car too long. However, once Linda explains that they have returned to get their little brother. They go quiet. Linda begins to weep.

### CHAPTER FOUR -PETER

When Sandy enters the front yard, he notices the big yellow car is missing. Mummy sometimes takes him to the Milkbar down the road, and he usually gets his favourite treat, a pink milkshake. Thinking of the thirsty shake, he heads down the road towards the Milkbar.

While walking, he notices that he is still holding the dog toy. 'Oscar could be at the park,' he thought, so he decided to head there before the Milk bar. Sandy knows the way to the Milk bar, and the park is along the way. He is hoping his brother and Oscar are there. Walking along the sidewalk, he notices a small bright green leaflet on the ground. He picks it up and takes it with him. It looks colourful, and he wants to show his mother. When he finds things like that, his mother expresses her amusement with Sandy, so he's always on the lookout for things. Sandy is happy that he has found something.

His oldest brother, Peter, often takes him and Oscar to the park. In the middle of the park is a playground. The playground consists of a swing, a slide and the monkey bars. Peter finds the playground fascinating. The monkey bars are a visual spectacle which presents odd shapes and sizes for him to play his visual game. Peter would sit on the park bench, looking at the monkey

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

bars and mentally arranging them into odd shapes. Peter has the same trait as Sandy, where he would sit for hours analysing the shape of things.

Kids from his school would make fun of Peter by naming him 'Pipe Dream Peter' and noting that he was off with the fairies. Peter didn't mind the name. However, it bothers him when they interrupt his train of thought. He sees the world differently than most and tends to be annoyed by repetitive noise or items that are not symmetrical. He would be amused in the car, looking up at the passing power lines and pretending that the lines were racing. Naturally, the higher power lines would win.

Mary often sees Peter staring into space, daydreaming, and she worries he's disconnected from the world. He has an unusual trait and sometimes becomes overly obsessed with certain things—obsessions, such as word searches, jigsaw puzzles, and now mathematical equations. Peter has no trouble with his schoolwork but struggles to make friends. He would shy away from strangers and would sit alone at school. His brother, Jack, is the complete opposite. Jack speaks to anybody. Mary is thankful that Peter and Jack got along; however, Jack isn't a saint, and she also has concerns about Jack. He often makes it difficult for her, especially at the most inopportune times.

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Oscar lies peacefully under a bush at the edge of the suburban park. He is trying to keep clear of the swooping Magpie above. The Magpie is protecting its chicks, which are in a nearby tree. The bush provides a sanctuary for Oscar. The black and white bird knows of his whereabouts, and if Oscar moves from under the bush, the Australian Corvidae would dive down and peck him on the ear. Oscar is aware of this and remains there with his eyes closed. Peacefully positioned, listening to the chicks chirping away in the nearby tree, he detects a different sound. Oscar knows the pattern of the footsteps running towards the playground. He opens his eyes and recognises his little friend; excited, he runs off to play with him.

When Sandy gets to the park, he sees the playground swing free. He runs for it. When Sandy gets to the swing, he jumps onto it but can only get his arms over the seat. He starts to swing back and forth. Before he knew it, he was bowled over by the big, brown, fluffy dog. Sandy recognises his companion and yells out, 'UCKAA!'. When Sandy puts his two hands up, Oscar sees the familiar dog toy and grabs it. The dog toy is a rope knitted in the shape of a figure eight. The toy idea is for the dog to tug on one end and the human to pull on the other. In Sandy's case, he holds on and is shaken from side to side. Sandy finds this quite amusing and giggles as he is stunned. Neither one would let go, so this goes on for a while.

Eventually, they come to a stalemate, and Oscar stops pulling. But Oscar doesn't let go. Sandy is thrilled to find Oscar. Remembering the milkshake, Sandy gets up and walks toward the Milk bar. Oscar keeps pulling on the toy but eventually gives up and walks alongside Sandy.

Not too far away, a young man drives his car through suburban streets to avoid highway traffic jams. On the radio, he hears a protest in town about the denial of Rhodesia's athletes' participation in the 1968 Olympic Games.

The announcer reports that Mexico is compelled by the United Nations Security Council Resolution to deny Rhodesian athletes passports. The news reporter continues to proclaim that the Rhodesians are for segregation, so their black athletes, who have a chance for a medal,

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

won't be allowed to attend. So it seems that some people in Australia have decided to protest against the unfair decision.'

The young man's interest in the news report stems from his connection to South Africa and his familiarity with the story. However, he has no interest in protests or sports. His desires cloud his mission. There is a small suitcase in the boot of his car, which contains a collection of his little treasures. The bag consists of trinkets and everything that symbolises his needs. He is a prudent man who takes great pride in his treasure hunt. The game isn't to have only the gems, but the planning, preparation, and execution of the hunt is his preference. Unfortunately, there are repercussions in the pursuit, and he has to keep moving. He was forced to leave South Africa due to the mistakes he had made. He repeated the mistakes when he arrived in Perth and then in Adelaide, so with his move to Melbourne, he needs to be cautious.

The man notices the Milk bar and stops to survey the area. It is busy with cars coming and going. He spots a park just outside the shops and enters the Milk bar. He orders a milkshake from the counter. When receiving the shake, he exits and sees a notice board on the side of the Milk bar. He walks over and stands, appearing inconspicuous.

He is a well-groomed man who blends into the background. He's learned to do this to continue his craft, and it's most important to remain discreet. He appears to be looking at the noticeboard, but he is scouting his next amusement.

### CHAPTER FIVE 1ET1TB

In a tree, perched up on a limb above the edge of the suburban park, was a male Magpie. The black and white bird has marked its territory in the park for five years. It mated with a female earlier, and her eggs hatched in a tree 50 meters away. His annual job is to keep larger birds and four-legged predators away. Instinctually, the Magpie's aggression can become so high that it doesn't matter what the threat is. Its range of aggression can extend up to 100 meters from the nest. It now focuses on the four-legged creature and a human approach. They are approaching the attack zone; the Magpie has no other choice but to lift off and make its dive.

When Sandy and Oscar reach the sidewalk at the park's edge, Oscar lets go of the dog toy in anticipation of the attack. Oscar detects the Magpie dive through the sound of its wings gliding through the air two seconds before the impact. The Magpie's dive is on course for Oscar's ear. Sensing the dog's movement, the Magpie pulls up and snaps its wings above Sandy. The loud snap shifts Sandy's focus from the Milk bar sign in the distance towards the sound. By this time, Oscar has avoided the Magpie by running up the road towards the Milk bar. Sandy sees a flying bird hovering above Oscar. Sandy giggles and finds it amusing. Sandy runs in pursuit after them. At the Milk Bar, Sandy loses sight of Oscar; however, he notices a tall man standing outside.

Jenny and her daughter Sarah are driving past Sandy towards the Milk bar. Sarah has just been to singing lessons, and Jenny has to stop at the Milk bar for supplies. Sarah is singing her recital song, 'Stop! In the Name of Love, a song that debuted two years earlier by the Supremes. Jenny loves listening to Sarah sing, and she encourages her often.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

When Jenny pulls up at the Milk bar and parks across the road from the entrance, her mother says to Sarah, 'I'll just be a minute.' Sarah watches her mother get out and walk across the road. As she walks past, Sarah notices something peculiar about the parked car. Sarah then starts to sing a different tune.

Since Sandy's father is away often, Sandy forgets what he looks like. He remembers that he is a tall man with yellow hair. The man standing outside the Milk bar has yellow hair too. So when Sandy reaches the tall figure, he pulls on his pant leg and asks, 'Are you my Daddy?'

The young man turns around, not expecting a little fella to come to him. He's confused about the question and asks Sandy, 'What did you say, little man?' Sandy repeats the question. The young man couldn't believe the question again and looked around as if it were a joke. Sandy then hands him the leaflet; the man looks at it, but remains confused. The man hands the flyer back to Sandy. A little suspicious, he says, 'No, but I certainly could take you to him'. Sandy gives him a big smile, and the man reaches out and leads Sandy to his car.

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Oscar finally evades the Magpie by ducking under a bush before the Milk bar. Oscar looks up, watches the bird give up, and flies back towards the park. He turns towards the Milk bar and sees Sandy with another human. Oscar goes over to meet his little friend again.

As Oscar approaches Sandy, he senses something is wrong. His sense of danger is so overpowering that he starts to growl. This human is a stranger to his little friend and is being taken away. Oscar lunges at the tall man's heel and bites hard.

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Jenny finishes shopping and exits the Milk bar when she hears a growling dog. When she looks over, she witnesses a dog nipping at a man's leg. A little boy yells at the dog, 'Bad dog!' Jenny is shocked at what she is witnessing and stops to watch. The blond man fends off the dog, looks around, and sees Jenny looking at him. Jenny notices the panic in him. The man lets go of Sandy's hand, quickly jumps into his yellow car, and drives off the street. Jenny walks to the little boy and hesitates about the dog beside him. The dog's attention is directed towards the departing car. Disturbed by the event, she asks the boy, 'Are you okay?'. The dog senses her movement and turns towards her. She stops, decides not to pursue it, and returns to her car. A little disturbed, she gets into the car and looks back towards the boy. She sees the dog standing by him as though he is protecting him. The dog seems to belong to the boy. However, she is suspicious of the man. She feels she needs to report this to someone, and then she realises that getting the licence plate number would have been beneficial.

She turned to her daughter, who was looking at the boy. She was singing a familiar tune she had heard on the radio. Sarah has such a beautiful voice and sings often. The words for Sarah were often sung,

*And in my hour of darkness.*

*She is standing right in front of me.*

*Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.*



## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Jenny likes the latest Beatles song, and the radio stations have been playing it nonstop lately. She asks her daughter if it was on the radio just now, and Sarah responds, 'No! I noticed that the license plate of the yellow car that just pulled away is spelt '1ET1TB.' Jenny stares at her daughter and is astonished, interpreting the spelling of the plate number as 'Let It Be.' Jenny smiles and then continues to finish the song with her daughter.

*'Still a chance that they will see.*

*There will be an answer; let it be.*

*Let it be, let it be'.*

When Jenny gets home, she calls the police.

Simon is sitting on the bench across the road, sipping on his milkshake. He also witnesses the confrontation, but he sees it differently. He recognises the little boy as Sandy, Jack's little brother. Jack usually teases Simon at school, so Simon has an idea.

### CHAPTER SIX - JACK

Jack is a mischievous little boy who always seems to cause trouble. Jack runs off and hides from his mother. Mary finds it hard to contain Jack and dreads taking him anywhere. Often at shopping malls, he runs off, and Mary would let him and then wait for the lost boy's announcements.' Jack finds this amusing. However, Mary also finds this funny since she knows it's coming. He would have to return at the end of the day, and the announcement was the only way. However, he is hard to control, and since Mary sometimes loses it with him, she threatens him by stating, 'Wait until your father comes home' Jack knows this is rare and does his own thing anyway.

Jack is a very gifted ten-year-old. His schoolwork is easy, and he keeps up with the sporty kids. Although his favourite game is Marbles. Marbles is a popular game in playgrounds and parks across Australia. The purpose of the game is to obtain other participants' Marbles. The game is to thumb-flick a Marble towards a makeshift bunny hole. Once in the hole, the opponent could hit the other marbles; if they hit the same marble three times, they scored the marble. Jack is often seen with his Marble bag playing against other suckers at school recess because he always wins.

Simon is a good Marbles player, but not as good as Jack. However, Simon's family is well off, and Simon has an endless supply of marbles.

The last time Simon and Jack played together was in the park outside the open stormwater drain. This is a common meeting place because it has a flat surface and a wall. Simon won this particular game. He was regaining his marbles from all the times before. Simon has over fifty of Jack's marbles, some of which are big. Big marbles have more value because they are big enough to hit more. Jack was running out of marbles and was becoming frustrated; he stopped the game by grabbing all of Simon's marbles and throwing them down the stormwater drain.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

The stormwater drain is big enough for Simon to fit in, but it's dark and creepy, and Simon doesn't want to go in. However, there are many marbles to gather. Therefore, he braves the creakiness and crawls into the darkness. The marbles must have gone a long way because it is dark when Simon gets to one. As he feels around for the marbles, Simon hears a growling noise, jolts up, and bangs his head on the ceiling. He lets out a mighty 'Ow!' His head hurts, and then he lets out a cry. Jack, at the entrance, making the growling noise, laughs as he hears Simon weep. Then he yells down the hole, 'Sucker', and takes off. Simon yells back, 'I'm going to get you, Jack!'

Simon thinks of this moment when he sees Sandy across the road. Simon spits into his milkshake and walks over to the little toddler.

Sandy is very angry with Oscar and yells at Oscar, 'Bad dog! Bad dog, UCKAA!' Oscar puts his head down in submission. Sandy looks up and sees an older boy coming toward him, smiling.

When Simon approaches, he says, 'Hey, little man, how's it going?'

Sandy sees the milkshake in the boy's hand and offers him the leaflet, hoping he will replicate it with his milkshake. He learned this trick from his brother, Jack. Simon reads the brochure and is confused by its purpose, then hands it back to Sandy.

Sandy points toward his hand and says, 'Milkshake?'

Simon shrugs, says, 'Sure,' and hands Sandy the milkshake.

Sandy takes a long sip and utters, 'Chocolate,' and Simon nods.

Simon takes the milkshake back and says, 'Hey! I know where we can get you a milkshake,' and Sandy smiles and bursts out,

'Milkshake, Yum! Yum!'

Simon adds, 'Okay, little man, it's back towards the park'. Simon leads the way, followed by Sandy. Oscar, eyeing the dog toy still in Sandy's hand, grabs onto it. Knowing the comfort of his furry friend beside him, Sandy doesn't let go.

Simon has plans for the little man and wants to repeat the experience with the toddler. Simon's first part of the plan is to take Sandy to the stormwater drain and coax him to enter the drain, with the thought of a milkshake factory being located within it. He then would go into the drain, leave him behind in the dark, and tie him up. The second part is to go to Jack's house and persuade Jack that Sandy is at the park looking for him. When they got to the park, he would tell Jack that Sandy was in the drain. Jack goes into the drain. Then, Simon would barricade the entrance, and Jack and his snotty little brother would be stuck there forever. The plan sounds solid, and he begins to smile.

When Simon and Sandy reach the park's edge, Oscar detects that familiar sound above, lets go of the toy and bolts towards the nearest bush. The defender's target isn't the four-legged creature but the taller of the two humans. The Magpie's aim is accurate, and the bird pecks Simon right on the side of the head, drawing blood from his ear. Simon doesn't know what hit

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

him, and he holds his ear. The Magpie returns with another dive. Simon gets up, all disoriented and sees the bird coming for him again.

Simon runs back towards the Milk bar with the bird in pursuit. The Magpie's squawking keeps Simon running well past the Milk bar in the other direction.

After chasing the human out of its territory, the Magpie turns towards the other human, who seems unaware of its approach. The bird flies high and then dives down towards the human's head. The eyes are the target.

### CHAPTER SEVEN -LINDA

Sandy's sister, Linda, has tears running down her face as she looks out the window from the back seat of the car. She couldn't believe she didn't notice Sandy in the vehicle before they departed. She felt rushed, and they all had forgotten about their little brother. Linda sees that this often happens, being left to his own accord.

Linda knows Sandy is a curious boy who continually wanders off. Once, at a shopping arcade, she remembers that he went missing, and she and her mother searched everywhere. Finally, they found him talking to a man. When her mother asked the gentlemen what they were talking about, the gentleman said Sandy had asked him whether he was his Dad. Sandy rarely sees his Dad; Linda suspects he doesn't know what he looks like.

Another time, Sandy was missing from the house; they looked everywhere but couldn't find him. He was eventually found at the park playing on the swing. He likes to swing. Her older brother, Peter, is tasked with taking him there occasionally to avoid him taking off again. His mother often put a rope around him when she was out. Linda takes comfort in knowing that he can show up and be okay.

Linda likes playing with Sandy; he's happy and giggles a lot, unlike her older brother, Jack, who would tease and play practical jokes on her. It's all a game for Jack.

One time, Jack had stuck a fake turd on the toilet seat. He had left the seat up, and when she put it down, she faced this wobbly brown thing on the seat. She screamed and ran out of the bathroom. Jack was in the other room, giggling away.

Peter has to sit between Jack and Linda when travelling in the car because Jack is a nuisance to his little sister. Although this isn't the case today, there is a sombre mood in the car. The music on the car radio makes it even more so. She hears the latest Beatles song and the lyrics repeat.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

*Get back, get back!*

*Get back to where you once belonged.*

*Get back, get back!*

*Get back to where you once belonged.*

*Get Jo Jo!*

Sandy is again annoyed with Oscar running off. He sees Oscar go into the bushes. He is unaware of the bird's attack. He yells, 'UCKAA! UCKAA!'. Oscar is sitting huddled under the bushes, looking at Sandy. After the third UCKAA! Oscar comes out to his little friend, looking up at the sky.

The Magpie is well into its dive and narrowing in on its target. The bird's focus on the human is distracted by the four-legged hunters. The bird veers off course, pulls up, and snaps its wing at the human. The bird flies off towards the park.

Oscar grabs the dog's toy in Sandy's hand and pulls on it to play. Sandy is annoyed that he will miss his shake and starts pulling the dog back towards the shop, but Oscar wants to return home for a snack. Sandy looks down and notices the boy dropped his milkshake, so he picks it up and finishes it. At this stage, he feels his arm pulled and looks down to see Oscar tugging. Knowing the danger from above, Oscar is persistent in taking Sandy home. Sandy smiles and starts to walk home.

When Sandy and Oscar arrive at the house, Sandy drops the leaflet in the playroom. He looks down and studies the strange symbols on the parchment. He has an idea. Sandy lets go of the dog's toy, and Oscar runs off.

Sandy goes to find another toy in the closet. The toy is a hand-me-down from the neighbours, consisting of a large easel with colourful magnetic letters. Fortunately, the letters are stuck onto the board, so Sandy puts the leaflet on the floor and arranges the magnetic letters to match the lettering on the flyer. After being satisfied with the similarity, he returns to play with his blocks again.

Mary turns into the driveway and stops the car. She runs towards the house, leaving everybody still in the car. When she enters, she goes to where she last saw Sandy. To her surprise, Sandy is still there. But before she could pick him up, Linda ran past her and knelt to embrace Sandy. With so much feeling in the room, Mary bows her head, and her eyes start to water.

When Mary looks up, something catches her eye. She notices the two words arranged on the easel. She sees the leaflet on the floor and picks it up.

'What's this?' she looked over at Linda.

She reads the wording on the leaflet, and the wording on the flyer is identical to the letters on the magnetic board.

She turns to her daughter and asks, 'Did you do this?'

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Linda declines, and they both look down at Sandy. Sandy is smiling.

### CHAPTER EIGHT -JIM

Two days later, Sandy feels very special; everybody is treating him nicely, and Peter and Jack want to include him in their games. Sandy wants to play 'hide and seek'. Peter is the first seeker, then Jack, and now it is Sandy's turn. Sandy is trying to count to ten with his hands over his eyes. He knows the counting, but it comes out mispronounced like 'Ate.... Nie...Kenn, ready or not, here I come'. Then he starts his pursuit and heads straight for the doghouse.

Mary is in the kitchen preparing lunch and listening to the radio. The News reports that the police have in custody a suspect regarding the Beaumont children's disappearance. Three children from the same family went missing off a beach in Adelaide two years ago. The only lead to this case was the children playing with a tall, blond-haired man during their disappearance. Yesterday, it was reported to the police about a confrontation between a tall blond man and a child with a dog at the Blackburn shops.

At this time, Mary becomes interested because they live near the Blackburn shops. The man got away, but a bystander got his license plate number and reported it to the police. The police caught up with the driver and arrested him because they had found a suitcase in the boot (trunk) of the car, which contained childlike items. The police believe some things may belong to the Beaumont children.

The News reporter says the most exciting part of this story was that the bystander could remember the license plate because of a popular tune. The licence plate was 1ET1TB.

The radio announcer said, 'If you don't know what that relates to, let me play a tune for you.'

The radio then plays the latest Beatles song, 'Let It Be.' Mary wonders who this little boy and the dog are.

A car stops at the house, and a tall blond man steps out and retrieves a suitcase from the boot. He looks up at the house and hears voices coming from the backyard. Then, with the case in hand, he heads straight for the side gate.

When he arrives at the gate, he sets the case down, peeks over, and sees a toddler in the backyard looking into a doghouse. He slips through the side gate and walks up behind the toddler.

When Sandy turns around and sees the tall, yellow-haired man, he stands still. Then, hesitantly, he extends his arm towards him and asks, 'Daddy?'

Jim smiles and says, 'Yes, it's Daddy.'

Hiding behind the BBQ near the side gate, Peter looks over and sees the familiar man. Peter yells out, 'DADDY!'

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Hearing the call, Jack comes out behind the wheelbarrow and runs to his Dad. Both Peter and Jack reach him at the same time and wrap their hands around him. Sandy smiles as though he has finally answered his question, sees the bunch, and wraps his hands around them.

Jim thought it was good to be home again. The kids have grown up since he last saw them eight months ago. Finally, especially Sandy, he could walk, talk, and understand what was happening. He really should spend more time with them, he thought. He would be home for a while writing his book, which would be an excellent opportunity to get out and do things with Mary and the kids.

He gets a cold reception when he enters the house to see Mary. Mary remembers the strange woman's call the other day and is confused about why he is home. He isn't due to come home for another month until after the 1968 games. But something went wrong, so she is expecting the worst.

She asks him, 'Why are you home, Jim?'

Jim recites what's happening and asks her to help him type his experiences in Rhodesia, which will eventually become a book.

Overwhelmed, Mary sits down on the kitchen chair and cries. Not understanding the situation, Jim comes over and puts his arm around her. She is happy to see him, but she's had a rough time with the kids, and finally, she must say, 'Something has to change,' and Jim nods.

Mary is an excellent typist and agrees to help him. Besides, what else could she do? Jim is very good at dictating, and Mary keeps up.

She has a typewriter that they received from her father's canning factory, the Flemington Model 1. This particular model makes a thumping noise. When the letter arm slams down on the page, it lets off a loud thump, which broadcasts throughout the house. So when Mary is typing, Sandy pretends to be tall and stomps around the lounge room in beat with the typing.

It ends after many weeks of thumping and Jim's voice dictating through the house. Jim finishes his dictating, and Mary is glad. She asks him what he wants to call it. He says he isn't sure and asks if she has any suggestions. She lies back in her chair. Sandy is still stomping. It is becoming annoying, so she gets up and tells him to stop.

When she reaches the doorway, she looks up at Linda's new toy across the room. It is an easel with magnetic letters. The two words are still on the board from the other day, and she has an idea. She calls out to Jim and asks him to enter the lounge room.

When Jim arrives, Mary points toward the two words. Jim looks up and reads the two words. He says, 'Yes, that's it' Mary remembers the leaflet on the floor and hands it to Jim. Jim reads the two words on the flyer out loud. 'Rhodesia Denied'

He opens the leaflet, and it reads that two days before he arrived in Melbourne, a rally was held to protest Mexico's denial of visas to the Rhodesian athletes.

He looks at Mary and asks, 'Where did you find this?'

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

She says she doesn't know, but thought Sandy may have found it lying around. 'Well, Mary,' Jim says, 'Rhodesia Denied is going to be the title of my book.' Just then, the doorbell rings.

Jim puts the leaflet down and walks to the front door. He opens it, and the postman hands him a telegram. He opens the telegram and reads it. He then smiles and returns to the lounge room. When Jim enters, Mary settles down with Sandy on the floor to help him play with his blocks.

Jim hands the telegram to Mary, and she reads it out loud. 'We congratulate you; you have successfully received a doctoral scholarship from Temple University in Philadelphia.'

She looks at him and asks, 'What does this mean?' Jim says, 'Well, it means we are going to America.'

Mary says, 'What, we are going where?'

# THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

## PART 2

### CHAPTER NINE PHILADELPHIA

Tracy's brothers are cornering Jack. They want to punish him for calling Tracy a 'Thug. Perhaps it was the wrong choice of words, Jack regrets. Tracy is known for doing brutal things, but he couldn't resist saying what he said.

After arriving two months ago from Australia, Jack met Tracy while she was wandering past his yard. Tracy only lives down the road, and she noticed Jack playing with his brothers, Peter and Sandy. Tracy is the same age as Jack, so Jack befriends her. She is intrigued by Jack's unusual accent and how he stands out from the other boys.

But today is a different story; Tracy feels that Jack has turned on her, and she doesn't understand why. Tracy has been especially friendly to him, and he keeps being mean.

Although Jack is starting to regret his friendship with her, he can't help his imprudence, cheekiness, and charming ability to say what he thinks, but today, he has gone too far.

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Earlier, Jack and his school friends, Greg and Brad, were playing 'Hide and Go Seek' with Tracy and her three brothers in Tracy's backyard. During one of the games, Tracy sees a squirrel hiding under the porch. She quickly runs to the garage, grabs a baseball bat, returns to the patio, and chases it down. When she has it cornered, she swings the bat and strikes it down. Such appalling behaviour has Jack call her a 'Thug'.

When Tracy hears this, she becomes angry and decides that Jack should retract it. When Jack refuses, she calls out to her three older brothers. Jack turns to see Greg and Brad appear, providing support.

Tracy's older brother, Tim, is in the tenth grade, solidly built, and behaves like 'Moe' from The Three Stooges; Moe is known to be impatient and constantly slapping his younger brothers around. Tracy's next older brother, 'Howard', is short and a daydreamer. He is quiet and never says a word. Tracy's younger brother, Wayne, a skilled sharpshooter, often blurts out statements without thinking. Tracy learns not to ask for his options. She knows one day, he will also call her a thug. Tracy is a solid girl and tough as they come, so not many schoolboys or girls would bother her.

Greg is a tall, lanky kid in the same class as Jack. Jack likes his toughness and has a strange Philadelphian accent. Jack notices that when he starts to talk, he always nods his head upwards and says, 'Y'all.' Greg would often greet Jack with a 'Y'all! Buddy, What's up?' and follow up without waiting for a reply, 'Y'all good?' Greg is known for his puns. It would take Jack a while to figure out what Greg is saying because of his accent. Greg started to call Jack 'Kansas' since Kansas is an hour behind in the time zone, and that's how long it takes Jack to come up with his puns.

He had met Greg playing Marbles in the playground. In one game, they had a dispute and ended up fighting. They pulled each other to the ground and wrestled for a while, and



## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

eventually, it became a stalemate. However, they have respected each other ever since and have become good friends.

Greg knew Brad from elementary school, and their families were close by. Brad is a chubby kid. Jack thinks Brad is odd; he is very defensive and always comes back with a witty remark. Jack finds out from Greg that Brad has six brothers, all of whom seem to hate each other—a band of brothers who constantly pick on one another. Jack remembers Greg saying, ‘Brad’s family was bound by blood but not by love.’

At the time, Jack thought this was another of Greg's puns, although it didn't make sense. Nevertheless, Jack befriends Brad. He appears to be streetwise, and for Jack to survive in this neighbourhood, he needs friends like him. Brad turns out to be a real soldier and follows Greg's advice. Today, Brad is ready to assist after seeing Tracy bash the squirrel.

Jack had become class president within a month of arriving from Australia. He became president not for being famous but because, on the day of the school elections, he handed out candy to everybody. It came at a price because he had to reach into his savings to buy the candy from the local store. Unfortunately, he finds out later that his main job is to run the school hall monitoring program. It is something that Jack isn't familiar with, and he must find someone to help him with it. Greg and Brad became his helpers because they liked being bossy at school.

Tracy's brothers surround Jack, so Jack must be cautious about his next move. Tim orders Jack to apologise or else. Even though Jack finds the little creatures fascinating, he starts to wonder whether they are worth it. He looks at Greg and then Brad, who also seems disturbed by the killing. So, his instincts were right; it wasn't normal. Jack holds his nerve, refuses to apologise, and bravely responds: ‘Up yours!’. Tim looks at his other brothers, and Jack can see them team up. Although Jack doesn't know why she killed the rodent, He thinks it's unjust, so he calls her a ‘Thug.’

Tim sizes up the mismatch and goes to attack. Jack senses it, goes for Wayne, the younger of the three, and pushes him to the ground. Greg steps in and grabs Tim from behind; he wasn't expecting him to lose his balance and quickly go into the dirt. Howard sees this and attacks Greg, but Brad grabs him and puts him in a headlock. Jack turns only to have Tracy grab his collar and yank him on his back, a trick she learned from watching 'Gun Smoke'; she quickly pins him down on the pavement.

After checking the oldest aside, Greg sees Tracy on Jack and pulls on her ponytail. Jack breaks loose and springs up, only to see Tim ready to strike. Jack puts his head down and proceeds to ram his head at Tim's stomach. With no element of surprise, Tim evades the blow, and Jack stumbles into the nearby bush. Tracy turns and kicks Greg in the gut, and he bails over. Brad is also losing his headlock with Howard and losing the struggle. Jack knows they are outnumbered by three vs. four, and the ultimate surprise is gone. Jack gets up and yells, ‘Run!’. Greg, holding his stomach and Brad letting go, follows Jack out of the yard with Tracy and her brothers on his toes.

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Jack's family had arrived four months ago from Australia. His father, Jim, had received a doctoral scholarship from Temple University in Philadelphia. They had settled in Glenolden, a suburb south of Philadelphia. Glenolden consists mostly of low-income earners and is 95%

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

white Caucasian. Jim had come to Philadelphia six months before his family and received a \$3000 grant to move his family and live for the next two years. Jim finds a job and gets a place to live before the family of four arrives. The study is complex, and the money has only come from the grant.

Jim found a place to rent in Glenolden. Rent was cheap in Glenolden, but it came at a price. Whatever furniture they had was borrowed from the University or came from Leftover Day. Every month, people leave their leftover belongings on the curb, where the town collects them and takes them to the dump. If you're quick enough, anyone could take it away before the garbage truck arrives. Little did Jack's family know that the furniture they had collected was infested with cockroach eggs, and it was only a matter of time before they discovered it.

They only have one car, which Jim uses most of the time. His wife, Mary, finds it hard to get around without a car. She only has access to the car on the weekends. Food from the grocery store is purchased once a week. Feeding a family of four is problematic, and Mary has to be creative with their purchases.

Jim's doctoral program lasts three years, and the grant money covers only a small portion of the expenses. However, Jim got quite lucky because his lecturer offered him a lifeguard job at one of the University's pools. On his first day, he arrives at the pool location to find an empty hall; he assumes he has been given the wrong place.

He returns to the lecturer to find out where the pool is located, and the response is, 'Yeah, that's the place, Jim; the University had concreted over the pool last year so the building can be made into residences. The construction starts next year, so enjoy the peace, Jim.' So, he goes to the pool office daily and quietly studies.

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Peter is wondering why he hasn't returned from school and hasn't seen him since this morning. So, he ventures down the street towards the school, hoping to find his way.

When he gets to the next street corner, he is relieved to see Jack running towards him from the side street. He isn't alone, and many kids are running behind him. Jack runs past him, and Greg and Brad follow. He recognises Tracy, one of Jack's new friends, also running towards him, and she looks angry. Tracy recognises Peter as Jack's older brother and stops in front of him. The band stopped as well. Tracy yells, 'Grab him!' so Tim grabs Peter's arm. Peter thought they were fooling around and playing along. Tracy thought of an idea when they had him pinned to the pavement.

Jack looks back while running and sees Tracy stop where Peter is standing. Jack and Co duck into his neighbour's bushes.

\*\*

Sandy, age five, the younger brother of Jack, is in the backyard trying to work out how to ride Peter's ten-speed. He has seen Peter ride it, so he wants to try it. They found the boy's style bike on Leftover Day. It was in pretty good shape, except the seat split in the leather down the middle. It is slightly uncomfortable when riding because the crack pinches you, and after a while, you stand to avoid the pinch.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Sandy doesn't know this because he can't sit in the seat while pedalling. He could hardly reach the pedals from the bar across the frame. At first, he thought he could pick it up and get on, but that was impossible. So, he works out that if he stood the bike near the back stairs, he could reach the pedals at their highest point. So, he pushes off using the top pedal from the rear stairs and falls when the bike comes to a stop. He doesn't care if he loses; he is happy just riding the bike for a short period.

Sandy hears a loud call from the street; it sounds like his older brother, Peter, so he goes to investigate. Sandy pushes through the hedge bordering the backyard and the sidewalk. He finds it easier since there is a gap for people his size. Everybody else must go around the barrier. On the sidewalk, he sees Peter walking his way. He also spots many kids walking toward him and notices Peter in the lead. Sometime in the future, when Sandy is old and grey, he will never forget this image of Peter, seeing his older brother walking in his underwear.

### CHAPTER TEN: THE FIGHT

Private Craig struggles to keep up with the marching troops. He has a massive blister on his toe. They have been marching for the last two hours without a break. The drill sergeant is eyeing his troops like a hawk. Any blemish, and they are punished. The task is to march for seven hours straight. You're exposed to extreme sun and heat in the Fort Edward area. Getting accepted into the Marines was the final task. If he fails, he is back on the street.

The father of four joined the Marines in his thirties, and he is no longer a young, vibrant teenager compared to his colleagues. He is streetwise, which helps the mental side, but on the physical side, he struggles. He needs to grit his teeth and March through the last task. The sweat is pouring down his forehead by the third hour, and somehow through the fourth, he looks down at his right boot and spots blood seeping through. Three hours to go; he has to make it.

A young soldier in front steps out and raises his hand. He is quitting. The soldier to his side grabs him and coerces him back to marching. The soldiers know the punishment; if they stop, they're stripped to their underwear, and if they stop again, the sergeant sprays them with water. Private Craig doesn't want that, so he persists.

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Jack's house is situated on a four-way intersection. The house is divided into two parts: the front is rented to a hairdresser, and the back is rented to Jack's family. The back part has three levels with access to the basement. The top floor consists of three bedrooms and a bathroom. The bathroom is located at the end of the hall, with its window overlooking the backyard. The ground level has the lounge, kitchen and dining area. The backyard has a single apple tree with hedges that border the side street.

Sandy looks down the street at his oldest brother, walking towards him. Peter keeps looking back at his followers. Sandy is unaware that the followers are looking for Jack, and Peter is the bait to expose his whereabouts.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Jack and his friends are hidden in the neighbour's bushes, watching as Peter and the posse walk by. When Jack sees them turn into his backyard, he has no choice but to protect his brother. He turns to his friends and says, 'We need to do something.' They all nod in agreement. Then, they run towards Jack's yard.

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Mary finds American television fascinating. Jim had somehow managed to burrow a colour TV from his office. So, when he arrived on his first day at the stagnant swimming pool, there was a colour TV in the corner. He was surprised that it was in colour. Last year, Temple University upgraded its Communication and Media Department to replace TVs with colour. Jim didn't need it, so he found a way to use it. Television in Australia was still black and white, so it was a novelty, and the kids loved it.

Television became Mary's obsession. Being home in this cockroach-infested house all day, she could only keep house and watch TV. The popular TV programs were 'Here's Lucy, The Brady Bunch, Bewitched, and I Dream of Jeanie'. These programs typically begin when the kids return home from school. Her daughter, Linda, often ran home to watch them with her. Mary has seen these programs before, but not in colour, so she looks forward to watching them again.

When Jack and his friends run into their backyard, Mary and Linda watch 'Here's Lucy'. Mary often hears the boys in the backyard and is relieved to know they are home. She feels no need to go and investigate.

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Tim finds a hose and starts to spray water on Peter. When Jack enters the yard, Jack goes straight for his stomach. Jack plans to remove the older brother, leaving Brad and Greg to cover the others. Tracy has Peter in a Nelson hold position, waiting for Tim to spray him. Peter is tall and thin, and Tracy finds him easy to handle. Peter still doesn't know why he is being bullied. He was playing with Tracy's game, but when Peter saw his younger brother enter the yard and attack Tim, he knew this wasn't a game. He feels Tracy's grip loosen when she spots Tim bale over. Peter pulls her arm around and puts Tracy in a headlock. He tries to hold her down, but she evades Peter's grip. Jack grabs the hose and spins it around, keeping the oldest at bay. Brad and Greg go to the other two brothers.

Following the boys into the backyard, Sandy stands observing all the wrestling. It was like he was watching a 'Popeye the Sailor Man' cartoon; each time a punch was thrown, he would yell out, 'Pow! --- Wham! Pow, Pow!' He thinks Jack needs a can of spinach, so he goes into the house in search of one.

Tracy's best hope in teaching these boys a lesson is to take charge. She gets out of Peter's headlock and sees Jack whack Tim with the hose. Tracy lets go of Peter and goes after Jack. Still in his underwear, Peter takes this opportunity and enters the house. He slams the door and goes upstairs to the bathroom. He has an idea, so he opens the bathroom window and yells, 'Hey Tracy!' Tracy is angry, and when she looks up, she is greeted with a warm surprise.

# THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

## CHAPTER 11 PETER'S REVENGE

Corporal Craig travels towards another mission in the Deuce and a Half Army vehicle. He is sitting across from his sergeant, whom he despises. The task is to assist in the clean-up of the Battle of Hue.

The Battle of Hue was the bloodiest and most protracted battle in the Vietnam War, which involved the South Vietnamese forces versus the North Vietnamese forces. When Corporal Craig first enlisted in 1960, he signed up for an eight-year term in the Marine Corps Infantry Unit. He was assigned to the 27th Marine Regiment. Over the eight years, he went from Private to Corporal. His rise in rank was slow, having been dealt with by idiots above him. He was singled out at times, being the oldest in the troop. His sergeant was often jealous because most men looked up to Cpl Craig, not him. The sergeant made it difficult for him, assigning him tasks that often kept him away from the men and isolated him for most of the time. The sergeant was young and immature; most of his men were aware of this and avoided him. In wartime, failed commanders were often disliked, and men would put them in harm's way. The sergeant didn't know this yet, but he would be a casualty at war.

Cpl Craig is easygoing and doesn't let much bother him. However, what concerned him was being separated from his family and dealing with the atrocities of war.

Each clean-up mission affected him significantly. His unit would turn up at a battlefield site and then be overwhelmed by the stench of decay. Ever since he had arrived in Vietnam, the combination of military smells, sweat, sewage, and rot had never left the air. Most of his assignments were to either burn or bury the dead. He often freaked out when he picked up a corpse, and a limb would fall apart. It troubled him to know that it could be him at any moment. He also carefully stepped around objects, as the fields were infested with mines, living rodents, and animals feeding on the dead. He has six months to bide his time and hopefully return to his family.

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Sandy is searching through the kitchen cupboards for a can of spinach. He knows what it looks like from the cartoons. He finds a can with green leaves and goes outside to give it to his brother.

When he gets to the back steps, he sees the girl looking up, being sprayed by a stream of water. Sandy looks up and sees Peter pointing his weenie, urinating out the bathroom window. The girl yells bad words at Peter. She then looks down, grabs the ten-speed Sandy had ridden earlier, and throws it at the house. Seeing his favourite toy being damaged, Sandy throws the can at the girl, but it misses. So, he runs up to her and tries to kick her in the leg. The girl sees Sandy coming and averts the strike. When Sandy's leg misses the target, it makes an unnatural sound, like a twig snapping—the snap echoes around the yard. Jack and Tim stop wrestling and look up. Brad has Howard in a hold, and they look over towards the sound. Greg and Wayne also stopped boxing. Sandy falls over, and when he tries to get up, the pain in his leg is so great that he lets out an almighty, ear-piercing scream.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Mary and Linda are inside watching TV when they hear a scream. They look at each other and know it's Sandy. Mary has never heard Sandy scream like that, so they both go to investigate.

When Mary reaches the back step, she is alarmed by the number of unfamiliar kids in the yard. She spots Sandy beside a girl, holding his leg, and Mary starts to feel her rage grow. The Beast appears.

### CHAPTER 12 MARY'S BEAST

When Mary sees Sandy lying on the ground, she experiences a race of uncontrollable thoughts. Her emotions are overwhelmed by a sense of how this could have happened.

When Mary was in nursing school before her marriage, she devoted a significant portion of her free time to the Church. She was involved with the church programs and helped wherever possible. She was a good typist and often typed letters for the church administration. In addition, she would attend all the Church's services and functions. This is where she met her future husband, Jim. Jim had left home at sixteen and took comfort in the church community. Jim had no money, so people at the Church assisted him in offering room and board to help around the home.

During Jim's upbringing, his family became unstable, and his parents frequently argued and fought. Jim's father loved his children, but wasn't the same since he returned from the war. He had become an alcoholic and was drunk all the time. Jim couldn't deal with this, so he left the family home. However, Jim wasn't stupid and knew that he had to finish his schooling to work his way and pursue his passion for sports. He dreamed of being an elite athlete and making a living. He was very handsome, determined, and focus-driven. These attributes are what Mary fell in love with.

Mary was raised in a loving home. Her father ran a canning factory in Melbourne and was quite well off. They would often go on exotic holidays with their extended family. She loved her extended family, comprising aunts, uncles, and cousins. Even during her nursing school years, she looked forward to her summer trips away with them.

Since Mary's marriage, contact with her extended family seemed to have stopped. She immediately got pregnant with Peter, Jack, and Linda within four years. Jim had completed his degree in education and taken a job with the local board of education as a physical education teacher. A teacher's salary wasn't enough to feed a family of three, so he took a lot of extra teaching work. This would take Jim away from his family for a few days, sometimes weeks, which Mary resented. However, her love for him was strong. She was determined to keep many of her troubles from her extended family.

When Sandy came along, Jim took a two-year coaching job in Papua New Guinea and left them back in Melbourne. Jim would often become so engrossed in his work that he would neglect his family. Mary would continually badger him for money and to return home. Since Jim was handsome and his line of work attracted women, Jim had many affairs. When Mary found out one thing, she threatened to leave him, but she loved him and hoped their relationship

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

would improve; she wanted to make it work. She regretted that decision back then, and she regrets it now. Jim's behaviour continues. Since coming to America, he has been away from home seldom. Mary is often left to manage the family alone with no support.

Mary is dissatisfied with her life and what it has become. She keeps these frustrations bottled up inside her, and somehow, her hindrances appear mostly in unusual ways. She sometimes laughs at the most inappropriate moments, forgets about the most critical things, or yells at the kids for the most trivial things. When yelling at the kids, she has a particular octave in her voice, a confident demeanour, and facial expressions that resemble a beast.

When Mary's Beast appears on the back step, she has no trouble telling everybody to get lost. Greg and Brad run for it; Tracy and her brothers, knowing the fight is over, promptly leave.

Linda is already with Sandy when Mary clears the yard. Linda looks down at Sandy's leg and sees no unusual blood or anything. He is holding his knee and looking in pain. Sandy tries to stand and then falls back down, letting out another scream. The scream catches Mary's attention, and she comes over, kneels to look at his leg.

She had completed her nursing education, but never really had the chance to put it into practice since getting married. Seeing nothing unusual, he picks him up and brings him inside the house. She sits him on the couch, and Sandy is crying uncontrollably at this stage. Mary feels his leg but doesn't see anything wrong. She could take him to the hospital, but they don't have a car or the means to afford an ambulance. She doesn't understand how the medical system works here, as they have been in the US for only four months. The Australian medical system is less expensive due to a favourable government scheme. Although they live from paycheck to paycheck here, she is cautious of the costly medical bills and decides to wait until Jim returns from work.

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When Tracy and her brothers are walking back home, she becomes emotional and weary and begins to cry. Tim puts his arm around her and assures her that they will exact their revenge.

### CHAPTER 13 THE DOPPLER EFFECT

After three days, Mary finally surrenders and takes Sandy to the hospital. He'd somehow broken his leg by trying to kick at Tracy and missed. The doctor says that it is a greenstick fracture. At the dinner table, Mary explains that your leg can break in several ways. She picks up a string bean from her plate and demonstrates. One way is to bend it slightly, and it will give way. Another way is if you bend it fully, it will break into two. However, if it doesn't fully break, it splinters, which is known as a greenstick fracture. Jack imagines the splinter inside Sandy's leg and expresses, 'Eewww!'

The following day, they are sitting at the breakfast table having Frosted Flakes, a treat Sandy received after having his leg put in a cast. During the three days of lying on the couch

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

watching TV, the TV commercials bombarded him with all sorts of stuff. They would show action-packed Matchbox cars, racing tracks, toy soldier figurines, and yummy cereals. His favourite cereal commercial was the Tony the Tiger one. He was always saying,

‘They're Grrr....eat!’

Jack is excited that it's Friday, although he's feeling tense. He wonders how he will get on the school bus today. Tracy has sent out word to her friends that Jack is targeted. Since Tracy goes to a Catholic school, they use a different bus, although they must wait at the same bus stop. Every day this week, Tracey and her posse wait for him. He thought he could avoid her the day after the fight, since they attended different schools. However, he didn't expect her to wait for him at the bus stop.

On Monday, Jack saw Tracy from a distance waiting at the bus stop; he decided to avoid the confrontation and missed the bus. He then had to walk the three miles to school. The next day, he hoped she wouldn't be there. He missed the bus again and again yesterday. Finally, he was tired of walking the three miles. So today, he has to time his run to the bus perfectly. He would hide in the bushes and, when the bus came, bolt towards the bus, hoping to get on without harm. Peter would have been in the same predicament, but the high school bus stop was on a previous street.

It's time to go to school, so Jack and Peter pick up their bags and head to the Front Door. When Jack opened the door, he could not see the front yard. A very dense fog had set in that morning. Jack has never seen such dense fog. It is so thick that you can't see more than five feet in front of him. An instant relief comes over him when he thinks he could use the fog to his advantage. Jack and Peter start walking towards their stops.

When they reach Ridgeway Street, Jack turns to Peter and says, ‘Let's cut across the railway tracks instead of going over the bridge.’ It is a five-minute longer walk if they go over the bridge, so Peter agrees.

Ridgeway Street runs in parallel with the Washington-Boston railway line. Trains along this line travel at speeds of up to 60 mph. The railway line has a perimeter fence, but Greg had told Jack of a way to get through without too much trouble. Jack and Peter know the way, but it isn't easy with the fog. Ridgeway Street is Tracy's street, so Jack has to be careful. The mist helps them. When Jack and Peter arrive at the tracks, they stop and look down the line to see if it is clear. They hear a train rumbling and catch the train's headlights in the distance. Jack turns to Peter and says, ‘It looks like it's all clear.’ Peter looks up towards the headlights and is puzzled. When Jack goes to cross, Peter grabs him from going further. Just as he did, the train rushes past.

Peter has been fascinated by the trains ever since they arrived. He would come down here often to watch the trains whiz past. He wasn't particularly interested in the trains, but rather in the noise they made as they rushed past. He was engrossed in how the sound of the oncoming train had a higher pitch than when it pulled away. He found that the rise of the sound tends to peak as it goes by, and as the train pulls away, the pitch gets lower. Peter, that day, had looked up at the oncoming headlight and heard the train noise reach that familiar pitch, so he was alarmed and reached for Jack. Jack turns to Peter and says,

‘How did you know?’ Peter responds with a shrug.



## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Jack has always thought his older brother is odd. He is reticent and daydreams often. He sometimes has to snap his finger to break himself out of his trance. At times, Jack wonders whether Peter is truly living in this world, despite his apparent knowledge. When he sees his brother shrug, he accepts that it's another one of those moments where he knows stuff. So, he accepts his response, and they cross the tracks together.

When they reach Peter's bus stop, Jack says, 'See you tonight. Oh, and thanks for saving my life.' Peter responds, 'No worries; I owe you.' They both smile.

Jack walks quietly to his bus stop. Walking along the sidewalk feels creepy, as he is unable to see more than ten feet before him. Jack senses he is close to the bus stop; his intuition is confirmed when he hears Tracy and her friends talking. He is still hidden from the fog, so he waits. All it would take is for the fog to lift, and he would have to walk another three miles to school. He isn't going to do that today. When he hears the bus come to a stop, he runs for it. Tracy sees him as he gets on and yells: 'I'm going to get you, Jack!'. Jack is elated to get on this time. He sees Greg seated in the back and goes to sit with him. Greg says, 'You'll, Kansas; I'm MISTified how you got on'.

Jack smiles at the pun and replies,

'Yeah, I smoked them'.

Greg laughs and continues, 'You'll need to get on at my stop next time,' and Jack assures him, 'Nah, I've got it covered.'

To change the subject, Greg asks, 'You'll, what are you wearing tomorrow night?' Jack gives him a confused look. Greg continues, 'You'll know, Halloween! Haven't you heard of Halloween?'

Puzzled, Jack asks, 'What's Halloween?'

Greg giggles, 'Geez, you Australians are foolish. Don't you know what Halloween is? It's when you'll dress up in a costume, go around people's houses, and ask for candy.'

Intrigued, Jack asks, How does that work? So, Greg explains the three days of All Saints. 'You'll, man, All Saints Day is normally on the first of November. This is the day when your demons are expelled. Cool eh! Anyway, the day before is Halloween. This is the day your demons come out and spook the neighbours. So they say,' Jack asks, 'So what's the third day?'

'Oh!' Greg says, 'Ahh, Cabbage night.'

The bus stops, and everyone has to get off. Greg says, 'I'll tell you about it later. I gotta go; see ya!'

Jack is curious about the third day, but is more interested in Halloween. The thought of collecting candy for nothing prompted an idea.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

### CHAPTER 14 'YOU BETCHA'

Jack feels confident as he walks down the school halls. He had become the class president and is now in charge of the Glenolden school hall monitoring program. He was scheduled for the last two classes. Friday afternoon is busy in the halls, so he suggests taking it to avoid boredom. If nobody is around to harass, it's not much fun. While walking on his third circuit, he sees an older boy walking towards him. He puts up his hand to stop the student. The student is a grade above Jack. Jack asks for his hall pass, and the boy replies,

'Oh, I was just going to the bathroom', Jack replies. 'You need to have a hall pass, Mate!'

The student apologises and says he will go and get one. The student walks back the way he came. Jack tries to hold back the smugness as he continues his circuit. At the next turn, he sees another boy. Jack hasn't met him before, and he appears to be older and more prominent. Jack indicates that he should stop. Jack says confidently,

'Hey, Mate! You got your hall pass?'

The boy looks at him and smiles. Then, the boy reaches into his side pocket and says, 'Yeah, sure.'

The boy takes his hand from his pocket, swings it around, punches Jack in the face and falls to the floor. The student spread-eagles over Jack and yells,

'THAT WAS MY HALL PASS, MATE!' and walks off.

As Jack lay there looking up at the ceiling, he thought of the irony: He'd avoided being punched all week and then walked straight into it.

When school finishes, Jack catches the bus and goes home with Greg. As always, they both sit together at the back. Jack asks,

'What costume are you going to wear tomorrow night?'

Greg sarcastically replies,

'You'll think of maybe dressing up as a Squirrel and then knocking on Tracy's door.'

They both laugh. Greg continues,

'Nah, Brad and I will probably knock on the doors of Logan, Boon, and Stuart Ave. Those streets generally give out the most candy. So, you coming?'

'You betcha', replies Jack. 'I'll walk to your place, and then we can go from there.' They both agree.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Tracy is in her room getting ready for the big night out. She had organised her friends to meet at the park. She does it every year and knows where they will start this year. It was time, so she opened the door and quietly descended the stairs.

She knows her father is home and not in the best of moods, so he might not let her go out on a Friday night. Her father hasn't been the same since arriving from his last trip. Before going away, he was good to them. They would often go out together on weekends and attend church gatherings. They would attend Church each Sunday and assist with any functions during the week. When he was away, her mother would continue attending church functions, but not in a rudimentary way. She is more relaxed in their form of religion. So Tracy has more time on her hands.

As she gets to the front door, she hears from behind her

‘WHERE ARE YOU GOING?’

She is startled by her father's voice. She turns and answers,

‘I'm just going out with my friends.’

‘No, you're not. You are coming with me to the church hall to set up for All Saints Day,’ he responds. She protested by saying, ‘But Dad, my friends.’

She knew the Church was essential to her father, and last Sunday, they were told at Mass that the Church was holding a fundraising Fete at the local park. All Saints Day was on a Sunday this year, so it would work perfectly if the Fete followed the service. They had asked for volunteers to donate items and set up stalls.

Her father has an extensive collection of Army figures in the basement and is keen to get rid of them. So, he wants to sell them off. Tracy knew about it, hoping to set it up tomorrow instead of tonight. Her father is insistent about what is necessary. Tracy misses having her Dad around. However, since his last trip, he has seemed angry and easily agitated over trivial matters. He was good to her for most of her life and made her feel special. Lately, he has seemed angry with her, and she couldn't figure out why. One day, she notices that when he falls asleep in front of the TV, he suddenly wakes up cringing, as if he wants to escape something. It worries her, so she often tries to please him. Since the mood in the house is sombre, she also feels angry and short-tempered.

Her voice was angry when she replied, ‘OK, Dad, I'll go!’

She walks past him, says, ‘Let me know when you want to go,’ and returns upstairs.

She gets to the top of the stairs and freezes; she recalls her previous plan and wonders how this will work. How can she get a message to her friends? Then she has an idea, goes to Tim's room, and taps on his door. She hears,

‘What?’

She opens the door and pokes her head in.

‘Dad's not letting me out tonight. Are you going out?’

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

'You Betcha!' Tim replies.

'Do you know who the target is tonight?' Tim again responds,

'You Betcha!' Satisfied, she nods and closes the door.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

### CHAPTER 15 CABBAGE NIGHT

When Jack gets home from school, he asks his younger sister, Linda, to help with his costume. Linda loves to dress up and has a knack for design and colour coordination. Her reaction was one of jubilation. 'Wow! I love dressing up,' she says as she dances around the room.

When he told her his idea for a costume, she laugh

ed and said,

'OK, that might be a little hard, but I'll see what I can do.'

Then she asks if she could come along, and Jack replies that he is going with Greg and Brad. She says,

'Never mind,' and she'll arrange to go out with Peter and Sandy.

Halloween sounds fun, and she also makes costumes for Peter and Sandy. Sandy's leg is cast, and she dresses him as a Mummy. Peter says he wants to be a cowboy, and she has an idea for his costume. That night, she scrounges around, looking for costume garments. She has it all under control by the end of the night, ready for tomorrow.

Later that night, Peter and Jack lie in bed, ready for sleep. Their bedroom is on the top floor, adjacent to the bathroom at the end of the hallway. As you look down the hallway towards the bathroom, Linda and Sandy's bedrooms are on the left, and Peter and Jack's room is on the right. As you enter Peter and Jack's room, Jack's bed is on the inner wall on the left, and Peter's bed is on the opposite wall on the right, next to the south window. The south window faces the street. Their bed heads were against the west window facing the side yard. There is a bedside table between them with a light. The light is off as they lay quietly. Peter likes this part of the night when everything is quiet. He has a game he plays, so he lies awake waiting for the familiar clicking sound.

When they first arrived at the house, he would hear the clicking sound and be scared of it. However, it happened every night, so he eventually got used to it. Like the train noise, it became an obsession.

After five minutes, he starts to hear the clicking noise. His game is to try to locate it in the dark. It moves around a bit. He would try to triangulate using his two ears and the noise source. He would detect its whereabouts and turn on the light to see if he could see it. He eventually worked out what it was. They were cockroaches. Sometimes, he would turn on the lamp to catch the cockroaches in their tracks. They were fast, so he could never get up in time to kill them. Doing this was an excellent way to occupy his mind since he found sleeping hard. Generally, the clicking noise could be heard within the walls. But occasionally, they were in the room. He notices a lot of clicking noise in the inner wall near Jack's bed. Jack finds sleeping easy, so he probably never detects the sound.

On this occasion, he hears the clicking noise from Jack's bed. It wasn't long before Jack jumped out of bed and said, 'What was that?'

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Peter turns on the light and says, 'That', pointing towards the floor where it fell. Jack looks down to see the cockroach running under the doorway.

'That little bugger ran across my face!' he continues. 'What the hell? I hate this place.' Jack is curious. 'By the way, how did you know what it was?'

Peter just gave him that familiar 'I don't know shrug'. Jack squints at him for a while, trying to figure out what that means. He eventually lies down again. Peter turns out the light. Jack had told Peter earlier that night about the incident with the older boy in the hall. Peter lay there thinking of how badly Jack's week had been. It could get worse if he wore that Halloween costume tomorrow. Peter is glad his costume is just a cowboy one. Just then, he hears a thump, followed by another one. Peter notes that it came from outside. He leans up and looks out the window. He could only see a dark, empty street. Then, 'BANG!' Peter, startled by the noise, jumps out of bed. Jack stirs and says, 'What was that?'

Still staring out the window, Peter could make out a clump of goo on the window outlined by the street light. Jack, noticing Peter looking out the window, says, 'Let's take a look.'

They both kneel on Peter's bed and peek out the window. As they do, they see two bodies running down the street. Jack says, 'Who was that?'

Peter answers, 'I think we both know who that was, ' and they say simultaneously, 'Tracy!'

Peter faces Jack; he can barely make out Jack's face from the street light and says, 'That girl is dangerous; you better patch things up with her or otherwise.'

Jack concedes, saying with a sigh, 'I know.'

The following day, Greg rings Jack's doorbell. He notices the eggshells on the stairs as he walks up. He spots a lot of egg goo on the house. On his way over here, he'd also noticed a few places along the streets that had been hit. He thought to himself. You undoubtedly don't want to piss off the neighbourhood kids in this area. His mother waited in the car to take the boys to their soccer game. Jack and Peter had joined a soccer team with Greg.

The team was organised by the Boys Brigade, a local youth group affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. Jack and Peter had only played Australian Rules football in Australia, so soccer was a new experience for them.

Greg was happy to have Jack and Peter on his team because they had lost every game the previous year. This year, they have yet to lose a game. Jack and Peter's influence has certainly made them a better team. Jack can control the ball well and plays in the centre. Peter isn't perfect, but he can run a lot and is left-footed to cover the left side.

Jack opens the front Door with Peter close behind. Jack steps out and notices the eggshells. 'Wow!'

Greg reacted by saying, 'You guys got bombed.'

Jack responds, 'Yeah, we heard it last night.'

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Greg continues, 'Good old Cabbage night will get you every time.'

Jack was curious and said, 'Cabbage Night?'

'Oh,' Greg replies. I forgot to tell you, it's the night before Halloween; it's the night when you'll go around and bomb the neighbours you hate.'

'Wow!' Jack responds.

Greg continues, 'Normally, they go to the mailbox by lighting a Cherry bomb. Then POW! Off goes the lid.'

Jack let out a little giggle. He imagines the mailboxes exploding like the Roadrunner had blown up the Coyote in the cartoon. Beep! Beep! Funny enough, he hears Greg's car horn when he thinks of the Road Runner. Greg rolls his eyes and mentions that his mother is waiting for them.

'You'll. Let's go and kick some ass', he impatiently says. When they get in the car, Greg utters to Jack, 'So, what are you wearing tonight?'

Jack gives him a cheeky smile. 'You'll have to wait and see.'

### CHAPTER 16 STRANGER THINGS

Tracy wakes up the following day. She didn't hear Tim come in last night because she was already asleep. It was the first thing she thought of when she opened her eyes. How did Tim go last night? She gets up and goes to his room. She taps the door and hears 'What' from inside the room.

She opens the door and sees Tim still under the covers. She sits on his bed. She reaches over and shakes him. Tim groans, 'What do you want?'

'Well! How did you go last night?' she asks.

Tim opens his eyes and looks at the ceiling, wondering what she is asking. Tim had a view of targets last night, and Tracy's beef with Jack wasn't as important to him. He thought that Tracy's grudge-holding had become a regular occurrence lately. Tracy has been a good sister, very supportive, and always pleasant to be around, although lately, she hasn't been herself. Something has changed ever since Dad returned. Life in the house is different; his Dad is out of work and always at home.

Tracey's father finished his previous career three months ago, and finding another job is proving to be hard. He seems to be hot-tempered more than usual. His mother is struggling to cope, and they argue a lot. Tim doesn't understand why. Since he is the oldest, he feels his Dad is picking on him much more than his younger siblings. He managed to avoid going to Church last night by providing a lame excuse that he had to study. His Dad didn't seem rational enough to work out that it was a Friday night, so he got away with it.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Tim senses her impatience and assures her that he got Jack's house. She smiles and asks, 'Who are you going out with tonight?'

He again, wanting her to leave, murmurs, 'You know, with the boys.'

She pleads, 'Can I come with you guys?'

'Yeah, OK, just get out of here,' he insists. She smiled again and left.

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Linda moves through the house and arrives in the lounge room. She twirls around and says, 'What do you think?' Peter shouts, 'Cindy Brady!' Linda rolls her eyes and says, 'No, you silly, it's Shirley Temple.' The black-and-white TV series always enthralled Linda. It was America, and she wanted to fit in. She managed to curl her hair and wear a white frilly dress. She wore black shoes with knee socks, which made her look the part.

It was about six o'clock, and the sun was still in the sky when Linda, Peter, and Sandy started their Halloween journey down the street. Sandy feels a little frustrated using the crutches while dressed as a Mummy. The wrapping of the Mummy fabric around his legs makes for a struggle. However, he is keen on the lollies and keeps moving with the costume.

Peter walks alongside her, wearing a cowboy hat. He had seen the movie 'The Alamo', which stars John Wayne, and he fell in love with John Wayne's films. He once heard John Wayne say, 'When in Rome'. He was curious about its meaning and asked his mother. She told him, 'Where you are is what you've become.' He thought about that for a while and decided he wanted to be a cowboy.

When they arrive at the first house, Linda hesitantly rings the doorbell. The door opens, and a lady stands there waiting. Peter and Linda look at her and then at each other. 'Well?' insisted the lady. 'Aren't you going to say Trick or Treat?'

Linda is shy and whispers, 'Trick or Treat?'

The lady smiles and presents a basket of apples. Peter looks disappointed at the basket and mutters, 'Apples?' Jack had mentioned that they would be given lollies. 'Ah, well,' Peter thanked her as they returned to the street.

At the next house, Peter decides to ring the bell. They wait for a bit. It is still daylight; the lights in the house aren't noticeable enough to know whether anybody is home. Peter pushes the doorbell again, and nobody comes to answer. Peter feels a bit awkward since they were told that there would be a lot of kids around with costumes. They didn't see any other kids on this street. Linda wonders whether this is another one of Jack's pranks. They will go to the next house and see.

Sandy finds it hard with the crutches, so they take their time. They arrive at an old Victorian house and turn in on the front path. There appears to be nobody home. The grass is taller than Sandy's, and the front porch has sagging floorboards as though nobody has done any maintenance for years. No cars are in the driveway, and the front screen door is wide open, exposing a gnarly wooden door. When Linda reaches the porch, she swats away the cobwebs and hesitates to step up. The house fascinates Peter because of its conical roofs. The roof over



## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

the porch has a steeply pitched slope rising to a peak. The roof is covered with grey slate shingles; some are dislodged. The corner of the house features a turret structure that resembles a rocket blasting off. A wrought iron railing surrounds the veranda, and the front wooden steps are splinted.

Peter takes a chance and charges past Linda up the steps to quickly ring the doorbell. The bell isn't heard, so he knocks on the door. Sandy has carefully made the final step by this time, with Linda helping from behind. They heard faint footsteps coming from the other side of the door. The footsteps go quiet. Feeling uneasy, Linda spins towards the street, thinking of giving up and returning home. She turns back to Sandy, reminded of his disability. His predicament doesn't allow for a quick getaway, and she decides to be brave and wait.

Finally, they hear the front door lock unlatching. 'Click, clack', releasing the door. A hand reaches around the door's edge, pulling it open. The fingers are gnarly, like the limbs of an old oak tree. An old petite lady in a frilly nightie with long white hair covering parts of her face stands at the entrance. Her eyes are wide open, searching from side to side, and her skin is tight with anxiety. Sandy finds this amusing and blurts out, 'Trick or Treat!'

Peter and Linda jump at the outburst and look at Sandy, eyeing him to be quiet. The lady slowly waves her hand as though beckoning them through the doorway. No words are spoken; they insist on entering. The idea doesn't entertain Linda, but Sandy is at the opening before she knows it. Linda looks over at Peter. Peter gives her that 'I don't know shrug' and follows Sandy. Although worrying for her brothers, Linda feels a shiver and enters the house.

### CHAPTER 17 THE ABANDONED HOUSE

Corporal Craig is on a flight home from Vietnam. He has a window seat, looking over the rice fields of Cambodia. He knows somewhere down there, somebody is getting shot. He is sure glad he is here and not down there. 'Good luck to them,' he thought. He'd witnessed a lot of injuries and deaths. He closes his eyes, hoping to die. His body's tired, but his mind keeps him awake. Once advised, if you want to function out here, become numb. 'Don't think about it, he remembers hearing. He'd witness senseless killings, mines detonating, rockets exploding, mass graves and the fall of law and order. One thing he couldn't shake was the flashbacks and frightening thoughts. Every moment down there was life or death; somehow, he'd escaped it. He will be finishing his time on his return. He will receive a military honour and then be on his way. However, the only happy thought is returning home to see his family again.

Jack waits until dark before going to Greg's place. Greg mentioned that the best time to trick-or-treat is at night. Previously, it was intended for children. It takes Jack over twenty minutes to walk to Greg's place. It would typically take ten, but his costume isn't designed for walking. Linda has come up with an absolutely beautiful outfit. However, it is broken down into practical parts. He takes it off to walk the distance, and when he gets to Greg's front porch, he puts it back on. When he is ready, he rings the doorbell.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Greg's mother opens the door with a candy basket in her hand. She extends the basket towards him and says,

‘There you go.’

Jack stands there, waiting for a reaction. He is half expecting Greg's mother to be spooked and shriek by saying,

‘What is this?’

However, it doesn't work that way at all. Jack hasn't been shown the ropes with what goes on with Halloween, so he doesn't know what to do.

Finally, he confesses that he is here to see Greg. Greg's mum looks up, and Jack removes the furry mask for a second.

‘Oh, Jack, well ...well,....’ She apologises and shouts, ‘GREG! ... Jack's here to see y'all!’

Jack hears someone running down the stairs and sees Greg poking his head around the door. ‘Aah, Kansas! What are you?’ he queries, ‘A giant rat or something?’

Jack is confused because he isn't a giant rat. He declared, ‘No, I'm a Kangaroo!’

This intrigues Greg. ‘What? A can ya row?’

Greg's mum corrects him, ‘No, it's a Kangaroo, son.’

‘Oh, he's a can ya row some,’ Greg says as he smiles at his mother.

She rolls her eyes, ‘What? No! It's an Australian marsupial animal!’

Greg cackles. ‘Never mind,’ he says to his mother, turning his head towards Jack. ‘Let's go!’

When they reach the sidewalk, Jack asks, ‘What are you?’

Greg wears black pants, a black shirt, and a red mask. Greg puts on the mask and says, ‘What do you think?’

The mask has fang teeth and a burnt, singed forehead. Jack is amused and says, ‘You're the devil?’ he smiles.

Greg laughs and says, ‘Hell, Ya'll!’

Brad waits for them when they reach the corner, holding a guitar. Brad has on a fake, bushy beard and a large, brown, buttoned-up overcoat. Jack admires the costume and asks Brad what he is supposed to be. Brad, wearing beige pants and a shirt, opens his coat to reveal his body. There is a long stuffed sock hanging from his midriff. ‘I'm Jim Morrison,’ Brad announces. He had seen on the news recently that Jim Morrison, the singer from the Doors, had been arrested for a gig he did in Florida when he exposed himself on stage.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Greg and Jack have seen the footage, look at each other simultaneously, and say, 'Real flashy!'

Then Greg adds

'It looks like it's going to be a LONG night.'

Jack thinks not to be outdone by Greg's pun and embellishes,

'Yeah, right to 'The End.' Jack only knows the song "The End" because when he visited Brad's house one afternoon, Brad showed him his cubby house in the backyard. Brad played The Doors' album on his eight-track tape.

Greg looks over at Jack with a smirk and sings,

'Well, he won't light anybody's fire tonight.'

By this time, Brad is on the ground in stitches; he'd always enjoyed Greg's puns, and now that Jack has caught on, it is becoming a real contest. Unfortunately, Brad is not clever enough to join in, but he knows if he laughs at them, that's all they need.

After Brad stops laughing, he gets up and asks, in his Philadelphian accent, looking at Jack, 'What are you supposed to be, a rat or something?'

Greg adds, 'Yeah, a giant rat.'

Jack, impatient with his costume choice, begins to feel stupid. He wants to take it off and leave it on the street. He responds by saying that he was trying to be a Kangaroo.

Brad laughs, 'Oh, those hopping animals you'll see in the Wild Kingdom. Cool! Man, I love that show.'

Seeing the sign of acceptance, Jack is keen to get started and says, 'Let's bounce.'

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The entry is dark, and the house studs are exposed on the wall, showing that the hallway has recently been on fire. The floor creaks with every step they take, as though the house is playing an eerie song. Sandy hears noises in the background, as if someone is playing the drums in the other room. At the end of the hallway is an archway. A flickering light is seen through the opening. The lady is walking backwards, still beckoning them to come.

Sandy's focused on the light as he walks with his crutches. It's tiring, and he hopes to sit down soon. When Sandy reaches the archway, the area opens into a large lounge room. The flames in the fireplace project a calming atmosphere. An oversized three-seater couch faces the fire in the centre of the room, with a slate-covered coffee table. The old lady asks them to sit down on the couch. Sandy is relieved, and it doesn't take much convincing. Peter looks around the room and sits beside Sandy, following the leader.

Intrigued by the room's layout, Peter notices an old-style clock hanging over the fireplace. The hour hand is positioned on the Roman numeral five, the minute hand on three,

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

and the second hand is stationary. It reads at a quarter past five. Peter reckons that the real time is after 6 p.m. and that the clock must have stopped recently.

Linda stays at the archway. She doesn't want to enter the room and anxiously looks down the hallway towards the front door. On the coffee table, there is a large bowl. The old lady points towards the bowl. Peter reaches over, picks it up and looks inside. Sandy leans over and peeks inside. Linda, behind them, can make out the reaction on Sandy's face. His eyelids open wide, and he smiles from ear to ear. It is as though he has scored the jackpot. Then, he reaches in and grabs a bunch of lollies. She makes out the labels on the packets. They resemble candy cigarettes, candy necklaces, Lemonheads, and even Red Hots. Sandy continues to grab and stash the lollies into his bag. Peter is following along.

Linda is wary and stays at the door. Once the boys have emptied the bowl, the old lady slowly walks to the fireplace and picks up a stoking iron. Linda becomes alarmed and quietly runs over to the couch, signalling for them to leave. Peter stands up. Sandy's lolly bag is packed and too heavy for him to carry. Linda grabs it and helps him up. The old lady has her back to them and is busy stoking the fire. Linda sees an opportunity and bustles Peter and Sandy back to the hallway. Linda looks back to see the old lady still poking at the fire as she walks out of the archway. She seems to be unaware of their sudden exit.

Sandy is in the lead, thumping down the hallway with his crutches. He pushes the front door open with his right crutch. It swung open wide, and they all stumbled through the doorway, down the steps, and onto the path. The door springs back shut with a BANG! They all jump from the sudden sound and look back like a dog is nipping at their heels. It is dark outside now, and it is hard to see the pathway to the street.

When they reach the street, they look back and see no one chasing them. The house seems invisible in the darkness and vacant. Linda proclaims, 'That place gave me the creeps.'

Peter agrees, 'Me too.' Satisfied with their takings, they head back home.

When they are nearly at their driveway, they see Jack, Greg, and Brad coming the other way. Jack asks Peter, 'How did you guys go?'

Linda replies, 'Halloween gives me the creeps!'

'Why?' Greg asks.

'Well,' she responds, 'We've just come from the weirdest house. It has steeples on the roof and looks like rockets were coming out of the sides.'

Brad said, 'Oh, you mean the abandoned house.'

Linda continues, 'Not really. This weird old lady invites us in and sits in this bizarre room.'

'Wow!' said Brad, 'That house used to belong to Mrs Wene, my old elementary school teacher, and she died when the house caught on fire. So it's been empty ever since.'

Greg and Jack grimace and say at the same time, 'Hollow Wene!'

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

### CHAPTER 18 CORPORAL CRAIG'S NIGHTMARE

As he looks around, a large pile of potato sacks is in the centre of a dark room. He picks up the bag, throws it onto his shoulders, carries it along, and throws it into the dark pit. He continues to do this repeatedly. After some time, he notices movement within the bags when he approaches the pile. It is as though the content of the inners is moving around inside. He is curious and feels around the outer surface of the bag. He is searching for the opening but can't find the seam. Finally, he gives up, picks up the sack, and moves the bags to the deep, dark hole. He could feel the movement on his back as he was carrying it. Then, he feels a probing scratch on his shoulder, as though he is being scratched by a claw protruding through the canvas material. He drops the bag, and it disintegrates as it hits the ground. The contents of the sack consist of Skeleton-like rats with wet, decaying flesh hanging from their bodies, dispersing in every direction. His first reaction is to contain them, but then he becomes aware that he's the target. The rats begin crawling up his legs. He tries to jump away, but they are already at his waist. He tries to shoo them, but they keep coming. Finally, he lets out a scream, and he keeps screaming.....

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Terry Craig hunches up to the top of the bed when he opens his eyes. He is screaming at the top of his voice, and once he becomes aware of his dream, he settles down. His wife, Tina, is already awake from the tossing and turning of his unconscious movement. Tina touches his shoulder, but her touch makes him react as if she were the monster and he were trying to escape her. She feels like running into the next room, but somehow, she knows this isn't her fault; it was a nightmare. These nightmares concern her. She worries it will affect the kids. Terry has been jobless and hasn't been concerned about getting another job since he left the army. He has other things on his mind. He has to come to terms with no longer being a Corporal in the Marines and dealing with being Terry, the civilian.

His behaviour in the household is taking its toll, not on her, but on the kids. She notices the boys are shying away from him, and Tracy, who is transforming into a woman, is worst affected. She doesn't like what Tracy has become. Tracy appears to have a chip on her shoulder about something, but she can't figure it out. Tina thinks that an evil spirit may possess Terry. What was this evil spirit? she thought. During his time in the Marines, he'd come home and be happy to see them. However, his happiness has somehow been lost since his return from Vietnam. She is reluctant to bring it up with him because it is hard to discuss anything with him. These nightmares are worsening, so she decides to share her thoughts with Father Owen in the morning after Church.

Tracy is awake in the other bedroom and hears the commotion. She knows that her father has terrible dreams. They were once watching TV, and her father fell asleep. She remembered how he was jerking around in the chair and suddenly woke up. She remembered the look in his eyes as they opened; it was as though he was scared of something. It was a look that she would never forget. Her mother says he fears rodents and then asks: 'If you see any rodents in the yard, let me know so I can dispose of them.' Her mother knows that rodents trigger fear in Terry, and if she keeps them away, he will stay calm.

Tracy believes that this nightmare was triggered by an event last night. When Tracy came home from her Halloween excursion, she heard her mother talking with her grandmother

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

about the incident on the phone. She mentioned that these kids were in Halloween costumes, and one was disguised as a giant rat. When Terry answers the door with a bowl of candy, he drops it when he sees one of the kids in a giant rodent outfit. Then, he goes upstairs to his bedroom, leaving the eager kids behind. Her mother then had to go to the door, hand them the candy and send them on their way.

Tracy straight away thought of Jack. Remember earlier this week when Jack and his friends played hide and go seek in her yard? She had encountered a squirrel and knew she had to escape it. So she picked up a bat, caught it and killed it. Jack didn't understand why she killed it and called her a thug. She couldn't explain it to him because he wouldn't understand. She thought Jack was cute and was hoping to go out with him. But ever since that moment, she has grown to dislike him. She wonders whether the giant rat was Jack and whether it was he seeking revenge for all the times he had missed the bus that week. As she lies on her bed, she is convinced that it is Jack and starts to plot how to get him back.

### CHAPTER 19 REDEMPTION

The following day, Tracy and her family sit in a pew looking up at Father Owen. Tracy knows the routine of Mass. Next are the readings, followed by the Homily. At first, Tracy found it difficult to attend church. She couldn't see the point. Every Mass was the same. They would go through the same agenda every time. She found it boring. She complained to her mother about it. Her mother sat her down and explained what it was all about. Her mother told her that their daily lives have rituals. She started,

‘We are accustomed to this because this is how we were raised. Church, in a way, is the same. The scope of the Mass can be thought of as a meal.’

‘A meal’, Tracy says.

Her mother continues, ‘When friends gather for a meal, they sit and talk. Eventually, they move to the table, say grace, pass the food, eat and drink, and finally take their leave and go home. When you look at Mass, we follow this same path: we gather and greet, we tell stories, we share meals, and finally, we leave, taking with us what we have learnt and continuing with our lives.’

After hearing this, Tracy understands and is content to follow along with the Mass.

Father Owen comes to the altar and reads the first Hebrew scripture reading.

The Lord's spirit left Saul, and an evil spirit sent by the Lord tormented him. His servants said to him. We know that the evil spirit sent by God is troubling you. So give us an order, sir, and we will look for a man who can play the Harp. Then, when the evil spirit comes onto you, the man can play his Harp, and you will be right again. (1 Samuel 16:14).

Father Owen then reads out the second and third readings. Tina doesn't pay much attention after hearing the words 'evil spirit'. She's trying to see the meaning of the reading. She keeps saying, ‘The evil spirit is tormenting him.’ ‘The evil spirit is tormenting him.’ She was

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

hopeful when hearing about a man who played the Harp; perhaps the Harp is what we need to make Terry right again. She was profoundly thinking when Father Owen started the Homily.

Father Owen continues using the first reading to prophesy what the scripture means. He discusses how Saul had anointed a king, and the Lord sent him to destroy the Amalekites. When Saul returned, the Lord was angry with him because he killed the people instead of their best cattle and sheep. The Lord preferred obedience over offering and sacrifices. Saul disobeyed his commands. So God sent an evil spirit to torment him. David was found as the harpist, and when David played the Harp for Saul, he felt better. He played for Saul every day. However, over time, David's relationship with Saul deteriorates, as Saul becomes increasingly jealous of David. Father Owen finished by stating that today is All Saints Day, and that believing and trusting in God will help you find a David in your life who will make things right again. Tracy usually was zoned out during the Homily. But today was different. Somehow, she listened and was intrigued by the story of Saul and David. She agreed that obedience to the Lord is necessary for acceptance. She felt she needed a 'David' to make things right again.

When the service finished, St George's Catholic Church organised a Fete to celebrate All Saints Day. The Church was located on the same grounds as Tracy's Catholic school. Therefore, it provided a perfect setting for the Fete. The Church volunteers have set up tables and stalls in the school hall and the playground. The Churchgoers would offer food and items to raise money for the Church. The Fete was very popular and attracted thousands of patrons each year. Everybody knows the Fete is held on the Sunday after All Saints Day. This year, All Saints' Day falls on a Sunday. Tracy's father has set up a stall to sell his army figurines. They were set up like dioramas on one-foot boards. He has positioned them all along with his three tables. It sure makes quite an attraction. Tracy has to man the stall for a while, as her father is talking to people and her mother is out looking at the other booths. She'd mentioned to her father that she wanted to go on the scavenger hunt, which is the highlight of the Fete. She looks forward to it every year. There is always a lot of candy to find since it comes from Halloween leftovers. So, she sits and mans the stall, waiting.

Tina has been in a daze since being distracted by the Readings during the service. She wanders down the row of stalls looking for things of interest, and she stops at the booth selling music albums. There are boxes, so she flicks through, hoping to see something she likes. The convener had a transistor radio playing the Christian radio station WIBG, which stands for 'I Believe in God.' It played a song she had recently heard, but didn't know who the artist was.

She hummed the last verse:

For I know that it's hard to see all the things we ought to be,

Many things we cannot see are there.

The Son died for you and me that we may live eternally,

Through Him, there is a peace we can share.

Yes, we can share

Come and see me, brother? Come and see me, sister?

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Come and see me, brother? Come and see me, sister?

After the song finishes, the radio announcer mentions that the music has just been released and the artist is 'Glass Harp'. When Tina hears 'Harp', she faces the radio. It was as though she had an epiphany. Maybe that was it, she thought. She has always taken going to church as a ritual, but never really feels the tug from God. Terry has always influenced her to attend church gatherings; maybe she will get it one day. In a way, Terry helps her cope with his sickness, and once she has coped, she helps him. At that moment, it is as though she is seeing God for the first time, and the weight is lifted off her shoulders. She understands the verse, 'Come and see me, sister?' She must find and play that album; things may get better. Could it be that simple, she thought.

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Jack is bored; he, too, is sitting in a pew, but in a different building. The Presbyterian service is nearly over, and he can't wait to attend the All Saints Fete. He'd heard that there was a lot of food and games at the festival. Greg had told him that it was the best thing in town. He can see Greg in the pew two rows in front, and they keep giggling at each other. Mary keeps looking his way, begging him to stay quiet. However, he finds it difficult to remain still. He is waiting for the benediction, which marks the end of the service. The Minister finishes by saying, 'By the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound by hope.' Then everybody would say, 'Thanks be to God, Amen,' and the organ would play a song, and that was the cue to leave. Jack would always try to be the first one out of the Church. He'd run along the centre aisle to the exit door behind. The Minister always beats him to the door regarding the final song. He is there to thank everybody for coming. Jack slowly walks, nodding to the Minister as he bolts out of the Church.

The Presbyterian Church is two blocks away from the Catholic Church. Mary didn't have the car this morning because Jim had to leave for work early to complete some assignments he needed to finish at Temple. Mary thought that even though their relationship had started at the Church, Jim had always found a way to avoid going to Church. She finds it tiring. When Mary, Peter, Jack, Linda, and Sandy assemble in front of the Church, they go down the road to the Fete. Sandy struggles using crutches, but he never complains. Mary is also looking forward to going to the Fete. She knew so much about it. She needed some things around the house and, hopefully, get them at a reasonable price. When they get to the street across from the Catholic School grounds, they are overwhelmed by the number of people. There are lines of stalls in the playground and the hall. Jack sees Greg and asks his mother whether he can hang out with him, and Mary agrees. So he goes off with Greg. When Sandy sees the booth with the dioramas of the army figurines, Sandy breaks away from the group unnoticed. He approaches the table with excitement. The stall is popular with kids surrounding the tables, and it is hard for Sandy to see the displays. The Dioramas consist of little army men who make the landscape look like a battlefield. As the scenes absorb him, he doesn't notice the girl behind the table. Sandy looks up and recognises her straight away. She is the girl who threw his bike at the house last week. She leans closer so nobody can hear and says, 'Get lost, you little twerp!' Sandy doesn't like this girl and wants to kick her again, but he isn't in a position, so he eyes her for a second, turns and crutches away.

When Tracy sees Sandy, she recognises him and looks around for Jack, but doesn't see him. She is angry with Jack and decides to take it out on his little brother. After she told him



## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

to get lost, she felt uneasy with herself; he was an innocent-looking kid and probably didn't deserve that treatment. But her war with Jack is collateral damage.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

### CHAPTER 20 THE SCAVENGER HUNT

At the edge of the playground is a hot dog stand. There is a large sign at the top reading 'Frank's Frankfurters.' Frank is busy serving wieners to a long line of hungry people. Greg and Jack are standing in line with anticipation. Jack had a hot dog at school last week and looks forward to munching on another one. Ten cents will get you a bun, a footlong wiener and lots of tomato sauce. He can't wait.

An announcement was made about the scavenger hunt, which would start soon in the park across the road. Greg had told Jack that the scavenger hunt was like an Easter egg hunt. But they wouldn't be looking for Easter eggs, but for all sorts of candy. It was much better than the easter hunt because each find was a big surprise. Greg and Jack look at each other and decide whether to stay in line or go off to the hunt. They both nodded and stepped out of line.

When they arrive at the park, at least a hundred kids are there. Jack looks around for Peter, Linda, and Sandy and is relieved when he sees Sandy. He knows that Sandy will find it hard to beat kids to the hiding spots, so he'll keep a stash for himself. The park has a toilet block off to the side and a jungle gym in the centre. There is an avenue of trees that surrounds the park. So there are plenty of hiding places. An organiser is located in the centre announcing the rules. The primary rule is you can't take more than you can carry, and the hunt is over once the siren is sounded. Jack is now zoned out, looking around for any advantage. There are a few spots to check out first. But it is a matter of how fast he can get there. The organiser raises her hand and announces, 'Ready!'... Set!' .... She lowers her hand and shouts 'Hunt!' It was like a bomb had blown up, with kids running everywhere. Jack is in the lead to the jungle gym, where there will surely be treasures.

Sandy is the last to get started and is far behind, struggling with his disability. Being in a rush and dodging other kids doesn't help. Linda and Peter are nowhere to be seen. So he keeps going. When he sees kids looking, he goes to that spot. But as always, there are no treasures to be seen. He heads for several trees, looking up to see if he can see anything, but there is nothing. Finally, he notices a small nook behind the toilet block and makes a beeline for it. When he arrives, he sees a small object under a fallen branch next to a tree. Just as he gets there. A kid comes from nowhere, snatches it up, and takes off. Frustrated and exhausted, Sandy sits down.

Jack has plenty of lollies in his pockets and down his shirt. He feels like Yogi Bear, carrying a picnic basket. Jack notices the toilet block, runs around the corner, and spots a small hiding place. 'Oh, certainly, there should be something there,' he wonders. He doesn't see him since he comes from the other side, where Sandy is sitting. Instead, he sees a depression in the ground, reaches down and finds a substantial rainbow-coloured lollipop. 'Wow!' He shouts out loud. He turns, and his heart sinks. Tracy is standing between him and the only way out.

Tracy has been spying on him ever since they started. She kept her distance and wanted to be alone with him. When she sees him duck into it. She follows him. She is in a rage, and all she can think of is smashing his head in. There is nobody else around. She dives at him, which takes him by surprise. He hoped to discuss it, but there was no time. She is on top of him before he knows it. She smacks him across the head three or four times before Jack can use his arm to stop her. He pushes her off and gets up. She doesn't give up, grabs him, and puts him in a headlock. They went to the ground again, and she had the advantage. She pins him down and

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

then grabs his neck with both hands. She's out of control, and Jack knows this. He tries to hold her hands, but she is too strong. Jack is struggling to breathe now, and he is scared.

Tracy finally has Jack where she wants him. He is in no position to get out of this, and she is aware of it. She looks down into his eyes and expects his smug look to disappear. It does, and then she sees his eyes turn to fear. She has seen that look before, and then it comes to her. She remembers that look from her father when he had woken up in the lounge room after his nightmare. It wasn't the look she expected, and it frightened her then. It is scaring her now. She remembers the Homily that Father Owen had read. She asks herself if an evil spirit was tormenting her. Did she need to find a Harp player, too? Was Jack the Harp player in the biblical story? Then, it is as though her heart was pulling towards him. She feels weary and experiences a sense of relief; it is as though a weight has been lifted off her shoulders, and the evil she felt has dissipated. All that hate was gone, and she felt relieved. She realises what she is doing and stops. She let go and then THUMP! Down she went.

Jack is inhaling to catch his breath. He was nearly unconscious when he felt her let go and land on top of him. He looks up over her shoulder and sees Sandy standing there with a crutch in his hands. He is smiling as though he has just hit a home run.

Sandy heard the commotion while sitting on the other end of the toilet block. He got up and moved around to see a girl wrestling with Jack. It was the same girl who told him to get lost earlier. It was the same girl who threw his bike up against the house and the same girl who made him break his leg. She had her hands around his throat. Sandy didn't like her, and he remembered the three days of pain he had endured waiting to go to the hospital. Every time he moved, a sharp pain went through his leg. He couldn't move or sleep, and when the cast came on, he had to put up with these stupid crutches. Angry and frustrated, he took this opportunity, lined up, and swung his crutch to hit her in the head. After he made contact, she went down like a ton of bricks.

When Tracy wakes up, she is still on top of Jack. She has her arms wrapped around him while lying on top of him. She doesn't want to let go, so she holds him tight and keeps saying she is sorry. Jack doesn't want to move, so they lie there.

When the siren sounded to stop the scavenger hunt, they returned to the park's centre. Tracy doesn't know what has happened before. She has a sore head but doesn't care. There are no bad feelings anymore. She reaches over to take Jack's hand.

Jack can't believe the transformation in her; it's as if Sandy has knocked some sense into her, and now she's different. Then he remembers what Greg said about All Saints Day. It's the only day of the year when your Demons can leave you. So, did the demon leave her? He doesn't care. He is happy that this ordeal will end, so he takes her hand and returns to the park's centre.

Sandy felt better after hitting Tracy over the head. His leg no longer hurt, and for some reason, he didn't care whether he found any lollies. His lolly bag was empty, but he had plenty at home. Sandy fell behind as they were making their way back to the gathering. When he arrives, he meets with Linda and Peter; their bags are packed. He presents his bag with no lollies to show. The organiser is aware of Sandy's disadvantage and asks everybody to gather around so she can make a presentation. She urges Sandy to come to the centre, then speaks about how hard it would be to come here today and not get anything. So she thanked Sandy for

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

coming and handed him a big candy basket. Everybody claps, and some come over to rub his head. Jack reaches into his pocket and puts most of his lollies into Sandy's basket. Sandy also noticed the big, rainbow, swirly lollipop that Jack had gathered. He picks it up and smiles. Jack reaches over and shrugs his hair. Sandy smiles.

# THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS PART III

### CHAPTER 21 FOUND

Sandy looks through the window and sees Peter sitting at the Cafe table. Peter's black hair has a hint of white at his shoulders. Anxiously, Sandy pushes the front door and looks his way. The six-month search has ended. Finally, Peter's whereabouts are revealed.

The Cafe is situated in the Midlands, a suburb of Perth. The neighbouring streets have a whitish appeal, like they've been dusted with sand. The shopping complex appears to be old and decrepit. Vacant signs pollute the windows of the adjacent stores.

The door squeaks as it opens, alerting Peter. Peter smiles at his little brother. He stands, and they embrace each other. Sandy feels how thin he is, and by Peter's aroma, he hasn't showered for a while. They both sit. Sandy notices the predominant freckles on Peter's face, just as he had when he was young. Peter's right foot taps on the floor as though stepping to a tempo. Peter's eyes dart around the room, searching for ordinary things that seem suspicious. Sandy worries that Peter will run out of the Cafe at any moment at the drop of a hat. Sandy smiles, 'So, big brother, where have you been?'

Sandy instantly wishes he hadn't asked that question. Peter had acted strangely since the last time he saw him three years ago, and now he behaves similarly. He has spent too much time trying to locate him and doesn't want him to disappear. He changes the subject without expecting a reply and asks,

'Do you want a coffee?'

'Ahh! Yes, thanks.' He responds.

Sandy walks over to the counter and orders two Cappuccinos. He scans the cakes under the glass counter and orders two slices of banana bread. Sandy turns, hoping to see Peter, relieved to know he is still present. He walks back to the table,

'So, what have you been up to?'

Sandy knows half the story. Peter lived in an apartment in Kenmore Square in Boston with a friend, and suddenly disappeared. Sandy spoke with the friend and said, 'Yeah, he had gone crazy. He was hard to live with. He kept accusing me of stealing from him and that I somehow had worked for the government and was spying on him.'

Sandy heard this before; when Peter left university, there were reports of him acting strangely. Although Peter's behaviour is primarily unusual, it appears to impact his life significantly. Peter visited Sandy in Canberra during his travels, and Sandy was surprised at how far Peter had retreated from reality. He couldn't distinguish between what was real and what was not. Sandy tried to explain the differences, but Peter wasn't rational enough to know. Sandy wonders how he got this way.

Peter replies, 'Well, little brother, not much!'

Sandy raises his eyes and smiles, 'Come on, you gotta do better than that.'

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Peter isn't much of a talker. The older brother daydreams, always thinking and trying to figure things out. He'd try to work out the pattern if something were out of position. He was looking at a 'Where's Wally?' pattern. It's unnerving, but that's him, and we've grown accustomed to it.

'I have something on my mind, and I need to get it off my chest, ' Peter announces.

A waiter approaches and places the coffee and the banana bread on the table. Peter picks up the bread and stuffs it down, as if he's starving. He continues,

'Do you remember Fadel? Fadel, you know the boy who lived near the Franklin Street duplex house.'

Sandy remembers the complex well; they moved there after Glenolden. Their father got a job at Boston College. Residing in Boston was expensive. Therefore, they ended up living 20 miles outside the city. There was a series of eight duplex houses in an isolated complex. Franklin Street provided the only way in. Sandy mostly remembered the patch of forest surrounding the complex. There were two areas in the forest where one could play: Indian Rock and Indian Pond. Indian Rock is a prominent granite spire with numerous nooks, and at its base is a pond. The pond is about the size of a basketball court. The kids would try to catch frogs and fish for minnows in the summer. In the winter, they would put out the hockey nets, skate around and play the local game. Low-income families occupied the duplexes. At the time, a Middle Eastern family of five lived next door. Each of the kids was of a similar age to Sandy's family. The oldest was Fadel, whom Peter befriended. Mushin was the same age as Jack and crazy Varten, who Linda hated, and Sandy, who played with Yasuf and the baby girl, was April.

Sandy pauses to think about Fadel and wonders why he's bringing him up now.

'What about him?'

'He died a few weeks back of cancer.'

Sandy always wondered what had become of Fadel's younger brother Yasuf since leaving the complex. He wonders how Peter knows about the information.

'How did you find that out?'

'I've been keeping track of his movement ever since we left. The family moved to Cleveland, and when I finished university, I visited Fadel. He was living in a rundown apartment and working in a Radioshack store. He wasn't in the best of shape then.'

'How long ago was that?'

'Around 6 years now.'

'How did you find out? Sandy asked.

'I read his obituary online. Nice of someone to write about him; not everybody has that.'

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘You shouldn’t be; he ruined my life!’

Sandy nods his head to indicate that he should continue.

‘It was something he said to me years ago that got me into trouble.’

Sandy wonders what could be said to a teenager which could drastically change someone's life.

‘Why! What did he say?’

‘Do you remember when I got into real trouble?’

Sandy thought of when Linda said, ‘Peter has done a bad thing.’ He's not sure why he remembers it. However, he never knew what it was and never asked at the time, although he is curious now.

‘Peter! Does it matter now?’

‘No! Not really. I’ve been thinking about it lately, with Fadel dying in all that.’ Peter pauses for a few seconds and then continues,

‘There was this girl I liked back then. Her name was Betty. Did you ever meet her?’

Sandy shakes his head. Peter continues,

‘Well, she wasn't pretty, but neither was I. We met at a party. She had straight, matted brown hair that would curl one way. The hair would curl inwards on the right side of the face, and on the left, it would curl away. It was intriguing. I had never seen hair like hers. She had freckles, too, like mine, but hers were darker, making her unappealing. That didn't matter to me. She went to a different school. Thank God! I couldn't bear to see her after what I did. Anyway, she was a year younger. Fedal and I were at a party, and I got drunk. The party ended, so we decided to go to another one. In the car, four of us were in the back seat. She was sitting on my lap, and we began to make out. The next thing I remember is that we were kissing. We were so inexperienced. We pushed hard against each other's lips, and my teeth kept clicking with her braces, but it felt good. I put my hand on her thigh, and she responded by putting her hand between my legs. I recall looking over at Fadel, who was also kissing a girl. We arrived at the party, which interrupted our passion. We had detached, although we reconnected again on the couch down in the basement. We had a few more drinks, and I returned my lips to hers. Finally, Fadel had had enough of the girl he was with and wanted to go home.’

Sandy presumed that this make-out session was typical for teenagers. He has done it himself and adds,

‘So, you made out with her.’

Peter hesitates,

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

'I know, but that isn't it. I caught up with Fadel the next week, and he was kidding me about Betty. Saying things like, 'You better watch out; you might get her pregnant,' I didn't understand what that meant, so I asked him, 'Kissing causes pregnancy?' He laughed at me, and then he told me, 'No, but sticking your penis into her will' Then he told me what to do to avoid it.'

Peter hesitates for a minute. Sandy is wondering if it's the end of the story. Then Sandy asks,

'Sounds like Fadel was an expert?'

'Fadel and I were good friends up until then. We fell out of friendship after that.'

'So, were condoms freely available back then?'

Peter slowly shakes his head, feeling uncomfortable, decides to change the subject, and asks,

'How's Jack?'

### Chapter 22 Trouble

The final school bell rings. Jack is eagerly waiting, sitting on one of the schoolyard benches. His youngest son is about to leave school. He's been away on business, and the four-week trip was long and busy. So, while driving home from the airport, he arranged for his wife to pick him up from school. He was hoping to surprise him. Jack arrived early and was content to relax, taking in the air of the schoolyard. The memories of the playground brought back the troubles he encountered. Recalling Henry, a tall, lanky kid, sitting on the ground surrounded by many bullies. Jack had felt the impulse to help, but resisted since being new at the school. Jack figured that they just wanted his lunch money. Henry appeared to be weak and was an easy target. Jack's older brother Peter often gets in the same predicament, but Jack always comes to the rescue. Luckily for Henry, the bell went off to end the lunchtime session. However, what happened next was something that he had thought about for many years afterwards.

They both had English after lunch. The Ashland school English teacher differed significantly from his previous teacher in Glenolden. His new teacher, Mr Polar, was mean and strict. He'd punish you if you didn't hand in your homework on time, spoke out of turn or were late. Especially if you came in late, he would pull out the ruler. The teachers in Australia commonly used the belt, and Jack detested it. However, he had never had a ruler. Mr Polar liked punishing kids by using the ruler.

Jack arrived at class before the second bell rang, which signalled the start of the session. Five seconds after the bell, Henry walks into the class. His pants were dirty and grubby. He scuffled past Mr Polar's desk and sat down in his usual position. Mr Polar eyed Henry the whole journey. Jack watched the encounter with intent and curiosity about how Mr. Polar would react. Henry was a good student and never made trouble with any of his teachers. Mr Polar was different; somehow, he seemed to enjoy trouble, looking for it at every turn. He was known among the students as Psycho Michael since his first name was Michael. Psycho Michael



## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

wouldn't be happy unless he had somebody to punish. It was apparent that Henry was his next target.

Mr Polar stood up and said, 'Henry!' as he moved towards Henry's desk. 'Henry! Why are you late?'

Henry flicks his long, dark hair over to cover his emerging rose cheeks. 'Sorry! Sir'

Mr Polar muttered, 'If I had a dime for every time you lot said 'Sorry!''

Jack could see the tension in Henry; it was as if he would break at any minute, with wetness visible in his crutch area. It appeared that Henry's day was about to get worse.

'Henry! Stand up, please!' Mr Polar bellowed.

One thing that Jack remembered about Mr Polar was that he was courteous. Although he was a mean son of a bitch, he consistently presented himself as congenial. It may be an act of promoting proper English.

'Henry! Mr Polar continued, I want you to put your hands on the desk, please! The word 'Please' didn't seem to fit, but Henry knew what was coming, and so did the bullies sitting in the back seats. They had their fair share of the ruler; now it was Henry's turn. You could hear the snickering coming from the back of the class. Mr Polar turned his head towards the laughter, which stopped before he could recognise the culprit. He turned back to Henry and lifted the ruler from inside his jacket pocket.

'Put your hands on the desk, Henry!'

Henry's hands were visibly shaking as he reached forward. He dropped his head to his chest. The room went silent. Even the tormenters in the back row had taken an interest in what would happen. Jack felt the urge to interfere again; it wasn't right for anyone to inflict this cruelty on anyone, regardless of who they were. Jack's actions are driven by instinct, a trait that is revealed when he looks out for his brother. Jack shouted out,

'STOP!'

The order had made everybody jump as though the Batman and Robin Character Joker had yelled, 'Boo!' Mr Polar jumped, too, turned towards the voice and stared directly at Jack. Jack got out of his chair, walked over to Mr Polar and grabbed the ruler from his hand. Mr Polar was too shocked to react. Finally, Jack, realising his outburst, ran out of the classroom, down the hallway and out of the school door.

Jack could still visualise the day. He wonders whether his offspring would ever pull off a stunt like that; he certainly is cheeky enough.

Most of the kids at the school were white and less friendly. Jack had found it hard to make friends there; most kids had friendships and weren't open to new ones. Jack remembered the kids kept making fun of his Australian accent. He knew he had to blend in with the locals. He missed his friend Greg from Glenolden, who had a strong Philadelphian accent. The funny-sounding words, such as 'Ya'll' and 'Yard', which he later adopted. After the stunt in the classroom, he was no longer the new boy but the boy who stood up to a teacher. Kids wanted

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

to be his friend. Jack never got into trouble that day; the teacher was fired. There were too many damning reports about his abuse. The principal was going to fire him anyway. Jack's stunt was the last straw. Jack's actions had made him a hero, and he took it well.

Jack smiled at the thought; his recall was interrupted by the school bell. He remained on the bench, hoping to catch his youngest's attention as he walked down the front steps. Jack sees him and calls to him. The seven-year-old notices his father, he smiles and runs over to him. When they finish their embrace, Jack looks down at Toby and waits for his first words. His lips quiver with a smile, and he stutters,

'When ..d.. d. did you get HHHHome?'

### CHAPTER 23 ANXIOUS

Responding to Peter's question, Sandy mentions that Jack still lives in Massachusetts, and his internet company is doing well. When Peter asks about his father, Sandy hesitates to answer. 'Peter, Dad died two years ago.'

Peter wasn't at the funeral, and nobody knew where he was. Although Sandy was surprised by Peter's reaction to the news. Peter's eyes drop to the floor. Sandy, too, looked down at his feet, remembering the ordeal. It wasn't something he wanted to repeat, but he needed to.

Sandy's parents, Jim and Mary, lived in the small town of Woodville, New South Wales. They moved there after Jim retired from Boston College. Jim was forced to retire due to his health. Jim liked to drink, and Mary suspected that it was the cause. He would go to the doctor and leave with the news that he was only a few bottles away from not recovering. Jim drank heavily, and every day after 5 pm, he would crack open a bottle and drink until his eyes closed. Every day blended into the next. Jim's liver protested, and they got sick multiple times. So, he had to give it up. But it was too late; he was a long way from recovery. His last bout of sickness was his downfall. Jim was still active in attending coaching conferences. He was in his seventies, and the constant travelling was taking its toll. He decided that his next trip would be his last. The doctor advised against it, but Jim took no notice and went anyway. Mary protested against it, but her efforts to stop him wore thin after years of trying. All she could do was wait for the worst. After over 50 years of marriage, they somehow agreed that Jim would pursue his lifelong work independently.

Jim was to attend a conference in Scotland with a stopover in Bangkok. Jim had numerous affairs over the years, and one of them took place in Bangkok. The next stop was Edinburgh for a conference. During his journey, he caught a virus that made him bedridden, and when he arrived in Scotland, he never made it outside the B&B. Instead of going to the local hospital, he crawled on a plane to Boston. He had lifelong medical coverage in the US. Jack's family was still living in Boston, and when Jim arrived, Jack took him to the hospital.

Sandy remembers getting the phone call from Jack. The incompetent doctor at the local hospital had nearly drowned him from the inaccurate flow of the intravenous drip. Jim spent two weeks in intensive care and three months in rehabilitation. The long days in the rehab centre drove Jim irate. Jack visited him often, and Jim persevered by saying he wanted to return to Australia. When Jack arrived, the first question he would ask was, 'When are you going to

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

get me out of here?’ Jack had no authority and kept asking the doctors. The same answer repeats. ‘When he gets well.’ In Jack’s eye, he was never leaving. Jim’s demands were met after spending three months in a Howard Johnson-type rehabilitation centre. The doctor warned him against it. Finally, Jim signed a waiver for his release. Jack arranged a flight to Australia, and the journey to the airport was taxing. Jack was going to put him on the plane and say farewell. Still, after seeing his old man in a sorry state, he decided to accompany him on the aeroplane to Sydney. He arranged for Sandy to pick him up at the Sydney airport. Jim never made it. He died halfway over the Pacific.

Sandy looks up at Peter as he finishes the story. Peter’s reaction is sombre. There are tears in his eyes, and he keeps wiping them away. Sandy, too, at times, stops telling the story. Sandy’s father was always distant from his kids, but the loss saddened him nonetheless. The father, Sandy, searched for his whole life, but he was gone. Finally, to change the subject, Peter asks, ‘How is Mum?’

Sandy’s Mum, Mary, was a nervous wreck about Peter. She went to great lengths to find him, and if it wasn’t for a bar fight in Fremantle in which Peter got arrested. Sandy wouldn’t be here.

Sandy hadn’t realised Peter’s predicament, ‘My paranoia was terrible when I was indoors,’ he once said. Sandy wondered what it would be like to live on the streets. The discomforts of finding a place to lie down for an hour or two, lying on park benches, going to shelters for meals, carrying your belongings and constantly being shoved from place to place. Peter had to keep moving since people weren’t sympathetic to people without homes in their neighbourhood. He eventually ended up in Perth due to the climate, and he heard that there were many opportunities available to him.

Sandy tried to surmise his misfortune: ‘How did he get this way?’ Sandy pondered. Peter has always been unusual; he sees things others don’t, interprets social interactions differently, and his rationale is questionable. But somehow, paranoia has set in on him. You couldn’t reason with Peter, it’s like he wasn’t rational or couldn’t see the bigger picture. ‘Is it normal to be rational, have empathy and not make assumptions?’ Sandy questions, ‘Can we be lost in our world and not realise how we affect others?’

The bar fight was another misunderstanding of Peter’s condition. I’m sure he had other incidents. Peter disturbs Sandy’s daydream by shifting his weight. Sandy breaks from his trance and looks over at Peter. ‘Well, she worries about you.’

### CHAPTER 24 LONG-LOST RELATIVE

Mary stands at the kitchen sink, waiting for the kettle to boil. She admires the Crabapple tree outside the window, its violet and white blossoms emitting the aroma of nature. Mary smiles, thinking of the effort that went into planting the tree. Then she recalls her Auntie Elma’s Crabapple tree—its annual beauty and then the mess it would leave. She wonders whether she has a photo, perhaps somewhere in the garage.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

The smell of gas interrupts Mary's attention, and she looks over at the stove. The gas burner has been extinguished. She reaches over and quickly re-ignites the element. As soon as she pushes the button, she hears a 'whoof!' as the gas ignites.

'Gee!' she reacts. 'That was dangerous!'

This action stirs a memory of a letter she read not long ago. Tears start to run down her cheeks, remembering the words scribed in ink that still keep her going today. It began with an envelope stuck on the kitchen door stating.

'For Elma, don't open the door'

Uncle Tim, Elma's husband, contacted Mary three years ago about helping him prepare his memoirs. Tim had written his memories in longhand and had mailed his jots to Mary to type for a story. Mary found the reading fascinating, and most of the notes reflect Tim's recollection of how events unfolded back in the day, including his upbringing on a farm in central Victoria, his involvement in his father's carting business, and his care of the horses. Mary discovered a great deal about her family and was excited about the prospect of publishing her memoirs. Her Uncle Tim had three younger siblings: Tomas, her Dad, Andrew and Jasmine, his only sister. The three brothers had run a successful canning business. Auntie Jasmine had died when Mary was young, and she didn't know much about her since her Dad never mentioned her. However, she was curious and wanted to find out.

Mary had travelled to the Victorian town of Alexandra, where her Uncle Tim resides, so that she could coordinate the information and notes for the memoirs. She hadn't seen her Uncle for quite some time, and his health had deteriorated. But his memory was sharp, and his storytelling ability was entertaining. Mary was fascinated by Uncle Tim's reflection on farming life. His explanation of how farm equipment worked was gratifying. He would draw pictures of how a spindle machine works, a contraption that would spin the wool into yarn using horses walking in a circle. He and Tomas would take turns leading the horse around the spindle. Jasmine and Dad were much younger then and missed the hard work. Mary learned that Auntie Jasmine and Dad were inseparable, always playing together. Their family moved frequently, searching for work and transporting farming supplies from one place to another. Mary was intrigued, wondering why she hadn't heard of these stories. Her Dad was very private and never told stories of his past. Mary was learning so much about her past that she finally asked, 'What happened to Auntie Jasmine?'

Uncle Tim turned to her and looked at her for a minute before answering. He pondered how much she knew. Her Uncle figured she knew the story and was puzzled when she asked. 'Don't you know?' he replied.

Intrigued by the question, she wondered whether there was a family secret. Her excitement grew, and she responded, 'All I know is that she died when I was young.'

Uncle Tim was surprised by Mary's response and learned she didn't know. He breathed and explained, 'Well, Jasmine had married Frank, a worker in our canning factory. Mum, Dad, Jasmine, and Frank were terrific friends and took family holidays together. After some time, Jasmine fell pregnant and had a beautiful girl, and she still is.'

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

Mary became excited about how Uncle Tim said, 'She still is; it hints that she is still alive and has a long-lost cousin somewhere.'

Uncle Tim continues, 'Jasmine became pregnant again, but the newborn died at birth. Jasmine and Frank were devastated, and Jasmine became quite depressed over the ordeal. She was quite ill and failed to care for her daughter. Your Mum helped look after the child for a few months while Jasmine was seeing a doctor. Finally, the burden of losing a child was too great, so she took her own life. She gassed herself in the kitchen using the stove. We were all very saddened, especially your Dad. They were so very close in their upbringing, and it took a long time for him to get over her death, a very long time.'

Uncle Tim's eyes started to water, and he needed to pause. Mary began to realise some of her family's actions now: her father's anxiousness and her mother's conservative nature towards her husband. She knew about this story or had heard it, but couldn't remember when or where. Her curiosity was taking over, and after a moment, she said, 'Dear Uncle, I'm so sorry I have put you through the memory. It must have been hard?'

'It was, and many people were affected by it.' He croaked.

Mary waited for her Uncle to continue, but he stopped to gather his thoughts. She asked, 'What happened to Frank and the daughter? Are they still alive?'

Uncle Tim looked at Mary again and exhaled, 'The worst affected was Frank. You have to remember that back in those days, it was hard for a man to care for a child. She was three years old, and they lived with your Mum and Dad. It must be a huge burden to lose a child and then a wife, Frank started to drink heavily. Your Mum tried to look after him, but Frank became too much of a problem, and he moved out. I believe he eventually married again. I'm not sure where he is now.'

Mary was about to ask about the daughter, but she stopped in thought, a slight memory crept in, and it dawned on her. Somehow, she knew this story. Mary knew of no other child in her household that her Mum and Dad spoke of other than her younger sister. She was seven when her sister was born, and she knew the story of their lives. All of Mary's thoughts were flooded with the truth. She always wondered why she looked different to her sister and why the treatment was different. It wasn't the lack of love or being the older sister. It felt like a preference, she thought. She was that child. She turned to her Uncle and expressed, 'Oh my God, it makes sense now. Why didn't anyone tell me about this?'

Uncle Tim mentioned, 'I would have thought that your Dad or your Mum would have told you.' Mary shook her head and remained silent. He continued, 'You must remember that things were kept on the hush-hush. Frank knew your Mum and Dad would care for you better than he could, and eventually gave you up for adoption. The adoption process prohibited him from contacting you until you reached adulthood. It was the hardest day of his life. At first, it was better that you didn't know, although I would have thought they would have told you when you got older. But, as you can see, I hesitated to tell you just now.'

Mary had mixed feelings. She felt a sense of relief from finally understanding her past, but also anger for not being told the truth. Discovering that her parents weren't who she thought they were and that she wasn't the person she thought she was was a lot to take in at once.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

The kettle whistle interrupts Mary's thoughts. She pours her tea and takes it out to the garage. She wants to go through her family bible again, which her Mum, Elizabeth, had given her before she died. She finds the family box and starts to go through it. What she was looking for was a letter from her birth mother. The address on the front of the envelope is marked 'For Mary.' It was written on the last day of her mother's life. Mary sat down, scrunched against the box. She starts to shake, and her eyes water. She opens it and reads,

'Mary, my love, my precious baby girl, my dearest, you will probably read this letter far into the future. You won't understand this until you've grown up, and maybe never, but I need to express my love for you so that you will always feel loved. Your father and I love you very much. Your father is a wonderful man, and he has treated me well. He was born in England and came from a village called Deeping Gate. He came to Melbourne by boat 10 years ago. His father was a painter, and his mother was a seamstress. I believe they still reside in England. My family's upbringing wasn't so good. Our father was drunk and hard on us. The years of carting goods from Ballarat to Melbourne took their toll. When I think of him now, I feel no love. His temper was ruled by the drink, coming home late at night, demanding respect and leaving the next day with none. Your Uncle Tim received the most abuse, and I worry about him. He appears to be pleasant, but I know he has ghosts. I'm saying this because it was hard on all of us. I was too sensitive and broke down many times during my childhood. The thought of having children is too much for me to cope with. However, I'm overwhelmed with love for you. There are moments when I become my father, the mean old fart who beat you for looking the other way. My emotions are out of control, and I need to do something about them.'

Mary looked away from the letter and thought she had lost control of the kids. They used to call her 'The Beast'. But, she continues to read, 'I feel you deserve better. I have arranged to have Aunt Liz look after you while coping with my depression. My thoughts are conflicted; the only way to ensure your safety is with Aunt Liz. In a way, I'm saving your life by taking mine. You will be OK Mary and I will always love you.

Love Mum.'

Mary held the letter to her chest and crunched it in her fist. Her face was shining with tears. This letter was her only knowledge of her birth mother. It was the only thing left in this world that contained her words, thoughts, and love.

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Sandy recalls his mother's orphan story. She only discovered this two years ago, by accident. Peter couldn't have known that story. Although his grandmother isn't related, and she is dead now, he still has to know.

Sandy looks out the Cafe window and then at his brother, 'Peter, do you remember Grandma Liz? Well, we are not related.'

Peter stopped tapping his foot, tilting his head as though avoiding a tick, 'What do you mean?'

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

‘Well, when Mum was typing the memoirs of the Great Uncle Tim, actually her real Uncle, he told her when she asked about Great Aunty Jasmine. Jasmine turns out to be her real mother.’

Peter’s eyes stare with confusion at Sandy, perhaps the same stare he had when he first heard it. Sandy recognises the odd stare and recalls, ‘I have been taken for a fool for a long time, and now I have only just found out,’ he thought. Peter responds, ‘Wait, wait! Grandma Elizabeth is not our real grandmother?’

Sandy thought he should start over, ‘Well, Grandma and Grandpa had adopted Mum when she was three. Jasmine married Frank, Grandpa’s employee. Frank and Jasmine had Mum, and then she fell ill from post-prenatal depression. So she took her own life by gassing herself in a kitchen.’

‘Wow!’ Peter sounds intrigued, which is the first time his eyes have focused on Sandy. ‘I always thought that was no likeness of Mum and Grandma Liz. Although she does look like Grandpa a little.’ Peter adds.

‘Yeah, but you should see the likeness of Great Aunty Jasmine to Mum.’ Sandy mentions.

‘I guess Mum was pretty cut up about it, eh?’ Peter asks.

‘I’m not sure. When I spoke to Mum, she had already known for a while, so I didn’t see her reaction. She said that she was in a daze for days afterwards. She laughs about now.’ Sandy smiles.

Peter leans back in his chair to contemplate the scene. His foot started to tap again. He looks out the window to his right to reflect. Sandy studies his older brother, staring out the window. Peter’s daydream stares are notable for being rock solid, as if he would remain still, not moving, and in complete concentration. Peter described his thoughts once, saying, ‘I see shapes and angles in the world, and everything else is a blur.’

Peter resurfaces from his thoughts and asks,

‘How’s Linda?’

### CHAPTER 25 ON THE EDGE

Linda looks down at her phone, waiting for the reply. Dazed by the drugs she has taken, she waits. The movement of the wheelchair stirs her from her phone. The nurse behind her pushes her down the hallway. Moments ago, she came from the opposite way. Her left foot cast pokes out in front like a battering ram. She smiles as the text message alert sounds. Her boyfriend Neil replies, ‘I miss you, Buttercup.’

Linda wonders how he would take the news, but that isn’t concerning her right now. She looks up the hallway and spots Rebecca, the ‘Disney on Ice’ show program manager.’ Rebecca waves and smiles. Linda rolls her eyes to say, ‘Can you believe this?’

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

The nurse stops pushing as they get to Rebecca. Linda turns to the nurse and says, 'Thanks.'

The nurse turns and leaves, 'So, what's the prognosis?' Rebecca asks.

'It's not broken, but badly sprained. The doctor felt a cast would help me keep it still... Thanks!' Linda expresses sarcasm in the final word.

She knew she'd be out of the Tour for the next couple of months and knew why Rebecca was here. She is arranging things for Linda which don't involve skating. Rebecca pushes Linda down the hall to the Cafe to discuss her situation. Linda feels joyful about receiving the buttercup message, but Rebecca's presence quickly squashes her joy. Her heart sinks, remembering the fall she had.

She had been skating for Disney's 'Christal Palace' Down Under Tour for six months. She travelled most of the Southern Hemisphere, touring New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. The company has just arrived in Johannesburg. During practice, the drape of Linda's custom caught on her blade and twisted her ankle when she fell to the ice. They don't usually wear costumes during training, but Rebecca had some guests to impress. She loved performing as Disney characters, and her favourite was Minnie Mouse. It certainly got most of the attention. Her artistic attention to detail had undoubtedly caught Rebecca's eye.

When they arrive at the Cafe, Linda assumes the worst and waits for the rejection. Rebecca sits down across from her and smiles. She reassures, 'I don't worry about the skating. I have a better offer for you. Linda leans back slightly and narrows her eyes. She tilted her head to the side, waiting for the following phrase.

'I've always admired your artistic ability and attention to detail with the costumes. Well! I need someone to fill in for the costume designer role. As you know, Jill is leaving us next rotation, and I hope you will step in.'

Jill has been Disney's costume carer for two years and is ready to return to the United States. Long trips away from her husband caused her to waver a bit. It is now time to amend their relationship. Linda knows how easy it is to get involved with someone on Tour—so many attractive and fit skaters need comfort. Linda had plenty of relatives, although she liked Neil and hoped things would improve.

Linda's eyes lit up at the offer. She smiled and thought Wow! She isn't going to fire me. I'm going to continue with the Tour with Neil.

She met Neil on Tour, who is part of the production crew. Sound and lighting are mainly his things. Their relationship appears to be taking a next level, and she wonders what would have happened if she had left the Tour.

'This is so unexpected. I thought you were here to let me go.'

Rebecca smiles back and says, 'Not yet, kid.'

Once Linda was released from the hospital, Rebecca drove her to the Northgate Ice Rink, where the skaters rehearsed. Linda wanted to see the crew before going back to the hotel. Linda looked out towards the city in a new way. She was sad that she wasn't skating tonight, but glad she was staying with the Tour. Linda was excited about the costume designer job. It's



## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

what she does best. She heard another tone from her phone and read, 'How's the ankle? Sweetie pie!'

Instant dread comes over Linda. She looks out towards the passing streets, darting her eyes from left to right, searching for the person she most fears. She looks down at the sender, and her worries are confirmed. Rebecca feels the change in Linda's persona. She asks, 'Is everything OK?' Linda looks over at her, realises that she is probably safer being with Rebecca, and says, 'Oh! Everything is OK, she says with a crooked smile. Linda puts the phone in her bag. Linda stares into nothingness, remembering the pain she went through with Henry.

Henry was a Canadian Hockey player from the town of Burkes Falls in Ontario. He played in the Ontario Hockey League and was dropped from Burke's fall team over conflicts with the coach. Hearing about player opportunities in Australia, Henry picked up his bag and left for Sydney. He eventually ended up playing for the Newcastle Steelers. Linda met Henry at the rink while practising for the nationals. It was normal for hockey players to fall for the pretty skaters, and Henry had his fair share of one-night stands with them.

After spending years in the US and returning to Australia a few years ago, Linda had taken to Henry's accent. The one-night stand turned into a longer relationship. They lived together for a few months, and their feelings for each other grew. He called her 'sweetie pie', and she felt loved. However, Linda was concerned about Henry's wayward behaviour, which included chasing the other skaters off the team. She found him in the corner of the rink, chatting with a skating colleague in a rather suggestive manner. She became angry and confronted him. Henry denied anything, but Linda wasn't fooled and ended the relationship. Henry was devastated. The Canadian Catholic country boy was used to getting his way. Linda stopped all correspondence with him. Henry became obsessed with her and continued badgering her at home and the rink. He would follow her everywhere, and Linda became worried. She left Newcastle for Sydney, hearing that there were auditions for the up-and-coming 'Disney's 'Christal Palace' down under Tour. Linda was staying with a friend and noticed that her car had been broken into, and then noticed strange things missing from her friend's apartment. At first, it was a bracelet or clothes, then she became suspicious that it could be Henry, and it was confirmed when she received a photo of the bracelet. She knew she had the bracelet with her when she left Newcastle. Her car's keys went missing and then returned. She was excited when she got the general casting position for the Tour, although she was concerned whether this obsession would follow her.

The Tour included Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Auckland, Christchurch and Perth as venues. The Tour arrangement had two people in hotel rooms everywhere she went. She would find evidence of being followed by Henry. She changed her phone number, but he managed to get that, so she changed it again. She consulted her roommates to look out for such things, but nothing came from that. He was sneaky, and she wondered whether she had seen something. The texting was real, but there was no proof that he was around. She could only imagine that he was lurking, watching through the hotel room window while she was in public or during skating rehearsals. Each city posed another mystery. Henry was like a leech she couldn't pull off, or like a dirt stain, one that couldn't be removed. She feared him during the day, at night, and during the performance.

Then, she met Neil. Initially, he was interested in her, but his intentions were innocent. Although she was cautious initially, not wanting to go through the same ordeal, he persisted, and she gave in. She needed comfort and the safety of a man. He is kind and thoughtful when

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

they are together. Henry was gruff and a bit of a showman. There is something different about Neil, and she likes it.

The Tour extended to South Africa, and Linda continued enjoying her company with Neil. She hoped to finally get rid of Henry's pestering texts once she renewed her phone. But looking down at this text, he found her number and knew about the ankle.

'He was close.' She thought. 'And how would he have known about the ankle? Since it only happened this afternoon.'

Dread has clouded her judgment. She needed to end it, and now it was the time. She should've done it from the beginning. It was time to get rid of the presents she had endured for so long. It was time to face it and end things right. She grabs her phone again and texts back to Henry. She has to meet him. She knows she has to reveal something that will make him stop. She thought, 'If he were here, he would meet her, and she would have to do it alone.'

The text reads, 'Northgate ice rink in 20 minutes.'

Linda knew her colleagues were nearby in case anything happened. The ice rink is located in the middle of Northgate Mall, where shoppers can look into the rink from the balconies surrounding the Western side. Linda found a bench looking out towards the ice. On the ice, the cartography coach has the skaters in line for the next scene. She recalls her high school skating coach calling it the Windmill. The windmill is where the skaters are lined up and cross each other. Both lines spin like a windmill, causing the outside skater to propel faster. The move allows the skater to slingshot into the following sequence.

Nervously, Linda glances around for Henry. Years of growing up in bad neighbourhoods made her streetwise. Wise enough to deal with this punk. She wonders whether he will show. Although he could be lurking in the background, perhaps wondering what she would do.

Twenty minutes had passed, and Linda knew Henry would find her if she positioned herself here. She hadn't told anybody about this meeting and didn't want to make a big fuss. Linda felt comfortable observing Neil sitting on the Zamboni. The skaters cleared the ice, and she smiled as Neil began his periodic ice clearing. As the engine turns for another rotation, Linda feels the bench move. She turns and sees a bearded man sitting next to her. Henry quickly looks down towards his feet as though he is submitting. He hadn't expected Linda to confront him. It is easy to chase your prey and surprise the hunter, but when the victim reciprocates, it's unnerving. Henry wanted her back, and he had to face her. Putting on a charming front, although immature, was his preferred tactic. He turns his head and asks, 'How's the ankle?'

Linda notices that he has gained weight and looks older. Of course, the fitness of being a hockey player would keep the weight down, but she had a feeling that Henry hadn't been on the skates for a while. He looks terrible. She frowns at him and keeps her upper hand. 'What do you want?' She demands.

He responds submissively. 'You! Of course.'

Linda knows that Henry was all talk and no action. Sure, she was terrified at first. But he never did anything physical to her. He only lurked in the background, wanting to scare her,

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

and maybe she would give up and return to him. There were times in the last three months when she found herself asking. 'I keep getting these messages, and nothing comes from his statements?' Oh, she knew that he was watching her. The pestering texts gave that away. But why would he come to South Africa? 'Sorry, but you have no right to follow me, and you know nothing will come from this. What is done is not reversible. The horse has bolted!'

'I love you,' he adds.

Linda pauses and contemplates what to say next. 'I don't love you, and the word 'don't' means what it means. Can't you see that? I suggest you move on and leave me be.'

'But I can't; I adore you. I watch you all the time, on and off the ice. You are so amazing in everything you do. I'm sorry your feet got hurt, but it was just innocent chatter. I wasn't flirting with your teammates. I was wondering about you and how I can assist. Even today, I was quite depressed when you fell; I felt quite ill. I wanted to run and help you, but I knew you would be angry if I showed up. So I wasn't going to contact you here. I was only going to watch you in the shadows. I couldn't help myself.' Henry looked up at her as he said the last word. Linda could see the desperation in his eyes. She wasn't expecting him to declare his love so openly, and her feelings started to change. Kinda expected the worst from him. The conversation wasn't going to plan, she thought. Linda smiles and puts her hand on his. She looks down at the ice and notices the Zamboni stranded in the middle of the rink. Neil is nowhere to be seen. She wonders.

She turns her head towards Henry and sees Neil kneeling beside him, glaring. 'Hey, Sport! What's up?'

Linda didn't expect the consolation, although she was thrilled that Neil showed interest. She pulled her hand away and thought it was time to reveal the situation since they were both here.

'So this is the famous Henry, the dog that keeps following you. Why are you here, Henry? I tell you what, let's take this outside.'

This isn't Linda's plan, and she needs to explain it, but not with Henry.

'It's OK, Neil, I can explain. I was just about to tell Henry I'm pregnant with your child.'

Neil's eyes widen. He hadn't known. He was excited to hear the news, but he was also confused and angry. He just saw Linda's hand on Henry and wants to know why.

Henry assesses the situation, gets up, and bolts, like a cat being cornered or a mouse sensing a trap. Neil's attention is on Linda. Linda watches Henry run down the mall until he's out of sight. Linda transfixes Neil and asks, 'Well?'

Linda turns to him and smiles, 'We will have a baby.' Neil stares at Linda for a moment.

Neil was aware she was sitting on the bench overlooking the rink. When he saw a gentleman sit next to her and they were conversing, his protective instincts took over. He raced off the ice with the Zamboni running and ran to her. With the adrenaline in his blood, he was ready for anything, but he wasn't prepared for Linda's news.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

His heartbeat slows, and he begins to understand what she is saying. The memory of the last five minutes has disappeared. It doesn't matter because he has just heard the best news: They will have a baby. He smiles and reaches over for an embrace.

With the Zamboni churning in the background, Linda looks down towards the ice and giggles, seeing the disruption. Linda kisses Neil like never before, holding each other for a bit. Linda's phone buzzes with a text. She pulls away and reads the text. It was Henry,

'Watch out for strangers, Sweetie pie. The world is a lonely place.'

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Peter looks over at Sandy. 'What a strange thing to text; although I can relate to what he's saying, where is Linda now?'

'She'd followed the Tour until the baby was born; they are in Philadelphia now. I believe they're having their second child. Neil is working as a sound engineer, the perfect job for him.'

'Did she ever hear from that sleazeball again?' Peter asks.

Sandy chuckles, 'No, I guess not. Linda hasn't mentioned it.'

Peter put his hand to his face and rubbed his beard as though he were pondering.

'Wow! My little sister, the ice princess. Do you think she'll go back to the Tour again?'

'I doubt it. I think she's finished with the Tour.'

Peter recalls the time in Glenolden when they were young. He was glad they left that place. Although he chuckles at the thought of the abandoned house, they visited on Halloween. Linda was so scared that she freaked out, and Sandy stomped around on crutches. They were so hyped up for days after receiving the lollies. They were good times. Life was easy back then; we didn't worry about things and weren't paranoid about them. He wonders how his little brother is doing and asks, So, crutch man, what have you been doing?

### CHAPTER 26: NOT A PLACE TO BE

A sense of relief comes over Sandy as he retrieves the hose. The roaring fire is only a street away. Sandy wants to wet down the back fence in anticipation. The sky is dark and full of smoke, and it's only two in the afternoon. The gusts of wind push the Gum leaves at right angles. The flying embers fall like snowflakes on the high ranges. When touching the ground, it was only moments before igniting. He scans the yard for spotfires. Elvis, the crane helicopter, woofing in the distance, is sinking its hose into the neighbouring pool, retrieving the life-saving liquid for the next drop. He yells to his wife to turn on the tap. She responds.

'It's already on!' Sandy looks down at the dribble of water from the spout—his relief changes to panic.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

‘We’re F\*CK!’ He screams.

He looks back towards the house. His two boys glared through the sliding door, and his wife waved her arms to get his attention. It’s no use. They have to abandon the house and get to safety. The bushfire has jumped the street and is burning the house next door. The power is cut, no water pressure, and the smoke burns his eyes. The air is hard to breathe. A T-shirt, shorts and thongs are his only protection. A whistle in the sky interrupts his attention. He looks up and spots a massive fireball, the size of a basketball, landing on the roof. The fight is over; he now has to get his family to safety.

The bushfire started in the Falkland Ranges, 100km to the west, 10 days ago following an electrical storm. The fire was in control until a hot, windy weather front came through. The winds blew up to 100 km per hour, causing the blaze to travel kilometres in minutes. The fire was forcing its weather, creating tornadoes and dry lightning. Everything in its path was doomed. Within hours, the fire had reached Epping Drive, the boundary street to the suburb. The residents were warned, but no one took notice; nobody prepared for the worst, and the worst was here now.

Sandy grabs what he can and packs the car. His two boys are in the back, and his wife is driving. He pokes his head through the window and says, 'I hear on the radio that there's a refugee centre at the high school. Be careful!'

She replies, ‘Why are you staying? Get in the car!’

Sandy looks behind the house and down the street. He coughs from the smoke. His eyes are burning, and he has trouble keeping them open. He turns back toward his wife. She is glaring at him to get in the car. He looks over and spots that their roof eaves have caught alight. It is hopeless to stay, so he curses and hops into the passenger side. The visibility is poor, and the embers are blowing sideways. It isn’t a place to be.

With all the distractions, he quickly looks around for Oscar, his brown Cocker Spaniel, who's been with the family for three years. The original Oscar lived in Australia, but they had to give him up when they moved to the United States. The short memories of OCKaa gave him comfort, establishing that all his dogs would be called Oscar. Oscar Junior, a miniature German Schnauzer, joined the family during their teenage years when they lived in Boston. Now he sees his long, stringy-eared friend on the floor in the back seat. He breathes a sigh of relief.

His wife hits the pedal and drives 100 metres down to the next intersection. They are confronted with another stopped car. The traffic stops, brake lights are visible in the distance, and nobody is moving.

‘What the F\*CK?’ His companion yells; a glance behind reminds her of the kids. The kids are glued to the window, restraining themselves with their seatbelts. The car in front creeps forward, hinting at a passage. Perhaps people came to their senses, and it was time to get the f\*ck out of here. No time for rubbernecking. As they inch forward, they see houses alight. Nobody was putting out fires, no firefighters, no fire engines, just abandoned homes disappearing from the flames—too many places, not enough extinguishers. Light from the sky occasionally peaks as they inch further away from the blaze. A brave policewoman has taken it upon herself to stand in the middle of an intersection directing traffic. It isn’t a place to be.

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

She seems just as impatient as the drivers, waving her arms like a spinning wheel to yell, GO THAT WAY!

To their left, the gum trees in the nature reserve glow like balls of fire. The blaze engulfs everything it touches. The heat is felt through the car windows. The only fire break is the road itself. The flames from the side of the road reach the car in front. It is only a matter of time before they catch alight unless they keep moving. Sandy feels trapped, as though they are on a factory belt moving into a furnace. Either way, they are through. For the first time, Sandy fears the moment. He chastises himself for leaving so late. His family is to die because of his lack of judgment. He disregards the power of the fire, not anticipating the low water pressure, the flying embers and the slow-moving traffic. The intense heat of the flames can melt anything, including the car, the tyres, and the windows, at any moment, with the expectation that the roof will cave in. The vehicle in front starts to move ahead, his wife pushes the pedal down harder, and the car responds by jumping forward. The road becomes apparent, the vehicles are moving faster now, and daylight appears. The smoke is blowing from their right, the streets are abandoned, and Sandy wonders, 'Where did all the traffic go?' He looks behind, wanting to return. Their house is on fire, and he wants to go back. Their precious items are in the boot, but not all; too many to pack quickly.

The photos of their wedding, as well as their pre-kids and toddler years, were gone. The eldest is five, and the youngest is three. Neither will remember this moment. It's just another adventure in the car.

Tears are seen in his wife's eyes. She wipes them and then again. They drive east for 16 km to the fire refuge. The inner city high school is the safest place. The town is filled with smoke. The winds have pushed it to the East, causing panic in some. They pull into the car park, and other victims are standing around their cars, with looks of despair at what they have lost. Volunteers walk down the pathways, pointing the way.

The auditorium is filled with people sitting down like a copse of trees. The parents are sombre, and the kids playing around like this is just another adventure. They won't know the devastation until later. The school becomes a makeshift shelter, but the organisation is still in its early stages. The refugees assemble in the auditorium. No one wants to be in this room. They want to return to their homes. The disturbance in their lives makes them irritable, impatient and angry. Outbursts of 'Settle!' are projected at the kids who are playing up or making a muck. The wide eyes of anxiousness control the mood.

Sandy peruses the chaos in the auditorium, feeling a strong desire to return home. He wants to go back to the car. But he knows they've escaped death. It isn't something to return to. He wants to sit in a high spot and watch the fires. He needs to know what is going on. He sees his wife feeling the same way. She keeps barking orders at the kids, 'Sit down! Be quiet!' Their whines are unnerving. 'Mummy! Can we go out to the playground?' 'Can we go to the gym?' She wants to keep an eye on them, but also wants them to behave. They need to find somewhere to sit down. They find seats in the auditorium facing the stage. Once they sit down, his wife turns to Sandy and says she wants to go for a walk. Sandy considered doing the same, but she had beaten him to it. Watching the kids is paramount, so he nods.

He notices some people coming into the room with boxes. The contents are divided into tables. The tables are littered with clothes and toys. A smiling lady picks up a decrepit stuffed dinosaur and beeline for his oldest. She gets his attention, reaches over the seats in front, and

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

hands it to him. She smiles at Sandy and turns to continue with her donations. His oldest looks puzzled and thinks of using it as a whacking tool towards his little brother. The toddler ducks grab it from his brother's hand and hold it close. The oldest expects a returned blow, but the youngest wants no part. Sandy intends to scold his oldest, but feels a wet nozzle in his hand. He looks down, and Oscar is looking up at him. The distraction relieves Sandy of anger, but comforts him that perhaps everything will be all right.

At that moment, an announcer on stage broadcasts that everyone will be split into classrooms and that a family member should come to the front to register for the room assignment. He notices that his wife is already lined up.

Lying on the classroom floor isn't Sandy's idea of comfort, although he is distracted from his thoughts. He can't sleep. Oscar, who usually sleeps on the floor in the bedroom, is stretched out next to him. Oscar's best day ever was to lie next to his master. What would he do without him? Being too hot, Sandy cast the sleeping bag across his waist. Spying the suspended ceiling tiles from the light in the hallway, he contemplates, 'What now?'

The memory creeps back to Sandy in the Cafe. When they returned to the property, the house was destroyed. It took them two years to rebuild. They were in more debt. The bushfires destroyed 500 homes, and much rebuilding was needed. Inflation took over. Housing became expensive, too dear to sell or buy an already established home. They just needed to rebuild, and that is what he did.

Sitting across from his long-lost brother reminded him of the time they lived in Glenolden. They had no money and lived in poor conditions and hostile environments, but they all got through it somehow. They have a bond as though they had gone to war, and now, years later, they were here, lifting each other, fronting the perils of life. Sandy smiles, and Peter notices and asks,

‘What’s up?’

Sandy notices the traits of Peter's paranoia, and his big brother still misreads the situation. Sandy has to explain that 'not everything is about him. We all have issues to deal with. He responds.

‘Do you remember that haunted house we visited on Halloween back in Philadelphia?’

Peter squints, trying to understand the question. He remembers the haunted house. Jack and Peter had returned to the house not long after that day. They found nobody home. It was abandoned, but they couldn't explain the existence of the old lady. Perhaps it was a local playing a trick. They didn't hang around long enough to find out. They even returned the next year and found the house had been rebuilt, and a new family moved in. He wondered whether the old lady was still wandering the hallways, beckoning for the occupants to follow her. He is amazed that Sandy still remembers it.

‘Yeah! What about it?’ questions Peter.

‘We did a lot of speculation for years after that time. I only remembered it because you guys kept bringing it up at the kitchen table, but I have a theory.’

## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

‘We had many theories, Sandy,’ Peter adds.

‘Well,’ Sandy continues, ‘We all saw the old woman collectively. We went into the old house, not knowing the state of the place, so it was neither a surprise nor a fear of entering. We took it at face value that this was normal for Halloween, but it wasn’t, as we found out. The old lady had to beckon us to enter the house, and we did. There was a bowl of popcorn on the coffee table, which we both ate. But it was Linda who was onto it. She didn’t feel right. ‘She’s a smart girl, that one,’ Peter adds. There is a pattern of being in a position of near misses. I’m not sure I ever told anybody this. Still, when I was four, I went to the shop searching for you guys. When I was at the shop, a stranger took me by the hand to coerce me into his car.’ Peter stops tapping his foot and focuses on Sandy, awaiting his next word. ‘Well, Oscar came to the rescue and bit his leg. ‘What happens then?’ Peter asked impatiently,

‘He got in his car and drove off. I was confused, so I didn’t make anything of it until Mum quizzed me later about where I got the leaflet.’

‘What leaflet?’ Peter looks confused.

‘It doesn’t matter; I am saying that things are happening around us that we can’t explain or make sense of. These things are out of our control, and we shouldn’t try to understand ‘Why’ sometimes.’ Sandy realises this conversation is going nowhere, but he has to say what he came for. ‘Peter, I’m not sure I understand the deal with you, but you don’t have to abandon us.’ Expecting a response, Sandy notices Peter kneeling while tapping his foot. Sandy waits silently. Peter looks up and focuses on Sandy. ‘There are things I need to say’ Sandy wonders what, and he remembers Peter’s episode with Fidel and asks, ‘So what was it that Fidel ruined your life?’

Peter directs his eyes down towards the floor and continues his story.

‘Well, it was some time before the next party, and we caught up again. Things didn’t go well at first, but once we got into the booze, it loosened things up again. Someone turned off the lights, and the next thing I knew, Betty was on my lap with her mouth on mine. After a while, I felt the urge to stick my penis into her. So I suggested that we go out in the car. I was concerned about getting her pregnant since Fidel told me. She was pretty flirtatious with me, so we went into the back seat and started to make out again. Our hands explored the area we hadn’t been to before. She grabs my hardness and wants to play with it. I wanted to explore, so I pulled down her pants and then, for the first time, I saw a girl’s crutch hair. She didn’t indicate that she wanted me to stop, so I turned her over so I could see her bum. Then, as Fadel said, I grabbed her by the sides and put my penis into her butt hole. Oh, man! She reacted straight away, and she screamed at me to stop. I was confused and stopped right away. Before I knew it, she had her pants on and was out of the car, running back to the party. When I returned to the party, everybody looked at me strangely, like I had committed a crime. I started feeling paranoid because everybody knew what I had just done.’

Stunned by the revelation, Sandy stares at Peter with an open mouth. He remembers Linda saying at the time, ‘Peter has done a bad thing!’ and now, 30 years later, he finally knows what that bad thing is.

‘What happens after that?’



## THE STREETS OF WILDERNESS

'Well! She had gone home and told her parents, and then they approached Mum and Dad. It wasn't very comfortable. Fadel laughed at me afterwards; performing these acts is quite common where he came from. So he didn't get into trouble, I believe.'

Sandy looks out the café window and wonders about Peter's confession. Was he admitting and needing to say sorry? Could he have retribution? Could he take it back? Sandy has wondered for many years why Peter has acted the way he does, running from something, being paranoid, and suggesting that he is being followed. Perhaps this was another episode that routes Peter's life.

Peter's childhood trauma wasn't something Sandy expected to hear that day. He remembers his childhood. The things he got up to and the understanding of the outside influences that led him to do such a thing.

Sandy breaks from his daydream to see the other seat empty. Peter has somehow left, and Sandy is left pondering. He scans the café, seeing no sign. Peter has disappeared into his world yet again.